

# Arab American Women's Poetry of Diaspora, War, and Intimacy

Thesis Submitted for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
at the University of Leicester

by

Dima Abdulmajeed Abduljabbar

2018

**Abstract**  
**Arab American Women's Poetry of Diaspora, War, and Intimacy**  
**by Dima Abduljabbar**

Despite the fact that Arab American writers have been contributing to the literary scenes in the United States of America since the beginning of the twentieth century, it is only in the last four decades that academic and literary interests in the exploration of Arab American literature, as a branch of ethnic literature, has been emerging in this country. In many cases, whenever research in Arab American literature is available, studies have shown that Arab American fiction has received more academic attention at the expense of poetry. Studies of poetry remain a rarity, with those on women's poetry being almost invisible.

To combat the lack of research in the field of Arab American poetry, and to demonstrate the nature of poetry that is written by women as a conduit of experience and consciousness as much as fiction is, this thesis is interested in the study of the poetry of four contemporary Arab American women poets. These include the Lebanese American Elmaz Abinader, the Syrian American Mohja Kahf, the Palestinian American Naomi Nye, and the Jordanian American Laila Halaby. Examining these poets' predominant themes: diaspora, war, and women's intimacy, provides contexts for the exploration of Arab American life and experiences, and highlights the poetry of women as a complex means of expression. The thesis concludes that through their poetry, the aforementioned women poets have contributed enough literary input to help eliminate ignorance and correct the misrepresentations inflicted on Arabs and Arab Americans.

## **Acknowledgements**

First and foremost, I thank God the Almighty for guiding me and for endowing me with patience to be able to reach an academic end I have always fantasized and highly esteemed. This end would have never been reached had not my supervisor, Dr Corinne Fowler, been there to help me through, throughout my seven years of study, as a part-time student in the University of Leicester. I can still recall my humble beginnings and how her intellectual and meticulous feedback matured my thinking and broadened my academic and research insights.

I thank God for furnishing my way with blessings and with parents who believed that it is knowledge that their offspring must seek even in the most difficult of times. I thank Him for a mother who departed from this life as eloquently as she lived it urging her children to the last breath she took to support each other until each makes his/her way. I thank Him for a loving and dedicated father whose belief in the power of the word and his devotion to reading and exploration grew in each one of us the passion for more knowledge that is rooted in documents and evidence. I thank Him for my four brothers who took me, their only sister, as an example of the strong and determined woman and hence unconsciously armored me with a challenging spirit and a sense of endurance.

I also seize the chance to thank both Dr Emma Parker and Professor Philip Shaw for examining my research during the probation stage and for the all beneficial recommendations they provided me with to ensure the quality of my future work.

To my Alma Mater, Umm AlQura University, I am grateful. To the Department of English at the College of Social Sciences there I am indebted. My words of appreciation are lacking when I am to thank this place where I studied, and I currently work. Each member in this department supported me in a unique way but they all believed in me even when I was on the verge of losing confidence in myself. I specially thank Dr Ali Abureesh for supporting me

when I first applied to the University of Leicester. His generosity whether in knowledge or in help is beyond description. I also thank my longtime classmate, friend, sister, and colleague, Dr Kholoud AlThubaiti, for believing in me and for always being there for me. I am grateful to the Abu Mansours: for the trust Dr Mahasen, Dr Shadiah, and Dr Anas put on me. They are not only my lifetime mentors, but a source of inspiration. When I thought that all doors of help are locked, it was Dr Ahmad Al Ghamdi and Dr Hasan Ghazalah who gave me a key to success. They helped me beyond their expectations and to them, as my professors and supporters, I am indebted. I thank Halah AlHetershi for all the time she spent listening to me with her all attentive ears. I thank Dr Huda AlMatrafi for inspiring me, and Dr Hadeel Azhar and Dr Suzzane Bardeas for answering my research queries and for the good consultations they gave me.

To my late supervisor at the MA level, Dr Rajeh S. AlHarbi are my deepest and sincerest prayers. It is true that he is gone from us, but I always remember him in every academic step I take and in every success I earn.

My family in Leicester; Dr Omar Gabbar, his warmhearted wife Dr Nadiene Soumakei, and their lovely children, have been of the biggest help to me in the times I spent in Leicester during the course of my studies. I pray God to prosper and protect them.

## Table of Contents

<b>Chapter One</b> .....	8
<b>Introduction</b> .....	8
The Story of Arab Immigrants to America: From 1908 to the Present .....	14
Arab American Writers and Writing .....	16
Arab American Literature: Characteristics, Themes and Phases .....	17
Arab and Arab American Women Poets: From 575 A.D. to the Present .....	26
The Literary Scenes in Arabia.....	27
The Literary Scenes in the United States of America .....	30
Elmaz Abinader, Mohja Kahf, Naomi Nye, and Laila Halaby .....	32
Thesis Structure.....	38
<b>Chapter Two</b> .....	41
<b>Poetry and the Expression of Diaspora or <i>Ghourba</i></b> .....	41
Introduction .....	41
Diaspora vs. <i>Ghourba</i> : An Etymological Discussion.....	44
<i>Ghourba</i> in Arabia: From the Pre-Islamic Era (6 <sup>th</sup> Century A.D.) to the Present.....	45
Diaspora and Survival: Pain and Balm .....	55
Global Racism .....	56
Racism Against Arab Americans .....	59
Diaspora is for Triumph: Integration as a Survival Model.....	63
Diaspora is Pain: Antagonism as a Survival Model .....	73
Diaspora is the Unspeakable: Withdrawal as a Survival Model.....	83
Diaspora is Bewilderment: Dissociation-Association as a Survival Model .....	92
The Arab American Speaks of Rivers .....	103
“I’ve known rivers:/ Ancient, dusky rivers” .....	104
Food to Fight Forgetfulness .....	110
Conclusion .....	119
<b>Chapter Three</b> .....	121
<b>Poetry and the Expression of War and Trauma</b> .....	121
Introduction .....	121
From the <i>Safar Barlik</i> (1912) to the US-led War on Iraq (2003): Ceaseless Traumas .....	123
Trauma at a Glance: From Sigmund Freud’s “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” (1920) to the Present.....	126
The Poetry of War .....	129
Mothers and the Grandmothers Excavating their War Memories.....	129
The Fathers of War Tell their Stories .....	141

War and Trauma and the Pains and Worries of the Younger Generation .....	152
A Hopeless and an Angry Generation .....	153
War Poetry and the Crisis of Iraq .....	167
Conclusion .....	187
<b>Chapter Four</b> .....	190
<b>Poetry and the Expression of the Intimate</b> .....	190
Introduction .....	190
Monopolizing Women's Intimacy.....	196
Patterns of Love and the Place of the Woman's Sexualized Body .....	198
The Passive, Passionate Women of Elmaz Abinader .....	199
The Aggressive, Passionate Women of Laila Halaby .....	208
The Confident, Passionate Women of Mohja Kahf .....	215
Mohja Kahf's Contemporary Sexualized Women .....	220
Mohja Kahf's Asexualized Oriental Women.....	233
Conclusion .....	258
<b>Chapter Five</b> .....	260
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	260
<b>Bibliography</b> .....	266
<b>Appendices</b> .....	295
Appendix 1 .....	295
Appendix 2.....	296
Appendix 3.....	297
Appendix 4.....	298
Appendix 5.....	299
Appendix 6.....	300

## Notes on Documentation and Spelling Conventions

In order to make this thesis more accessible to the reader, I employed the following conventions:

To shorten the long titles of the poems undertaken for analysis, in the first appearance of the poem, full documentation is given followed by a footnote referring the reader to the shorter form of that documentation. Hence: “*Thawrah des Odalisques at the Matisse Retrospective*” (Kahf, 2003, pp. 64-69) becomes “*Thawrah*”. Documentation information is removed from the title in its short form.

No attempt has been made to change the letter case of a given title. Throughout the thesis, I adhere to the case as is used by the poet. Hence: “a warning to all Arabs travelling back to the United States” (Halabi, 2012, pp. 117-120) becomes “a warning”.

Unless they are part of a quotation, transliterated Arabic words are italicized. However, if they are incorporated into English dictionaries, no italicization is applied. Hence: *hijab* not *hijab*.

I use the term Arab American without a hyphen and only use it hyphenated when it is spelled so in an excerpt I have incorporated into my thesis. To use this term un-hyphenated is also a practice in the field.

Proper Arabic Names are spelt according to common use unless they are spelt differently by a writer I quote.

## Chapter One

### Introduction

“Yes, I carry explosives  
They’re called words  
And if you don’t get up  
Off your assumptions,  
They’re going to blow you away”  
(“Hijab Scene #7”, Kahf, 2001, p. 39).

There is no denial that the United States is a “polyethnic” (Smith, 1988, p. 150) country with an “antedated” (Smith, 1988, p. 150) majority of white ethnicity. In this country, White Euro-American ethnic identities predominate over those with African-American, Native American and other minority heritage groups<sup>1</sup> (Smith, 1988; Frazier and Margai, 2010; Giddens, 1987). These groups, however, are offered “mobility” and the chance to assimilate into the “white” culture (Smith, 1988, p. 150) that predominates in the United States. Anderson (2016) and Smith (1988) agree that recent immigrant groups are inclined to accommodate the norms and values of white America but nonetheless maintain family ties with those remaining in their lands of origin. This accommodation is a way of finding a role in society and a means of gaining respect (Smith, 1998). To combat marginalisation on the basis of their ethnicity, immigrants bond with others with whom they have “shared meanings and experiences” (Smith 1998, p.14).

However, defining who Arab Americans are, as an ethnic group in the “polyethnic” (Smith, 1988, p. 150) United States, is a controversial issue. That is because the term Arab American does not simply mean someone of Arab descent who lives in the United States. This minority group that resides in the United States with a population of around three

---

<sup>1</sup> “White non-Hispanic, Black, Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Island” (Frazier and Margai, 2010, p. 24).



million people (Yehudai, 2006) enjoys intracultural, religious, and ethnic differences that make it diverse (Hartman, 2006; Haddad, 2004; Salaita, 2006; 2007). To emphasize the diversity of this group, Steven Salaita (2007), asserts that Arab Americans are:

Muslim (Shia and Sunni and Alawi and Isma'ili), Christian (Catholic and Orthodox, Anglican and Evangelical, and Mainline Protestant), Jewish (Orthodox and Conservative 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. (p. 1)

Given that, and the fact that the first Arab migration to the United States is more than one century old<sup>2</sup>, Arab Americans, according to the Arab American Institute, suffer to a large extent from the ignorance of “policymakers” who are “unaware of the size, diversity, and interests of the Arab American community” (2018, no page). The ignorance of the politicians makes it difficult for the Americans in general to comprehend and appreciate this component of American society and cause Arab Americans to feel underappreciated (Kaufer and Al Malki, 2009). Additionally and most importantly, some persistent stereotypes (Mason and Matella, 2014) see Arab Americans as “inferior, barbaric, sexist, and irrational” (Haddad, 2004, p. 15; Nash, 2012, Said, 1979) and impose another challenge on Arab Americans in a society that facilitates the use of these derogatory stereotypes to identify Arabs and Muslims (Salaita, 2005; Kulczycki & Lobo, 2001; Wald, 2009). To date, negative stereotypes of an

---

<sup>2</sup> The first wave of Arab immigrants to the United States arrived in America by the end of the nineteenth century (Handal, 2001). More details in this chapter in Section “The Story of Arab Immigrants to America: From 1908 to the Present” (p.15).

exotic Orient to which Arabs, and necessarily Arab Americans belong, remain in the ascendancy in the West and the United States is no exception (Mason and Matella, 2014; Almond, 2007; Hackforth-Jones and Roberts, 2005; Lewis and Macmaster, 1998; Said, 1979). Both Said in his seminal book *Orientalism* (1979) and Almond in his book *The New Orientalists* (2007), for example, agree that for many Westerners today, the mythology persists that the East is a mysterious, undeveloped part of the world that antagonizes modernity. According to Said (1979), such “notions persist” at an academic and institutional level as well and “without significant challenges” (p. 301; Almond, 2007). Commenting on *National Geographic* the monthly magazine of the National Geographic Society, Steet (1996) affirms that even this scientific magazine falls short of objective practices since a significant proportion of its articles continue to circulate the same “fantasy” about this part of the world that is “so integral to Orientalism” (p. 207). These attitudes, eventually, continue to aggregate the “anti-Muslim and anti-Arab” feeling that conflates, ironically, even those “who are neither Arab nor Muslims” (Salaita, 2006, p. 2) but who have similar complexion, tradition, and language (El-Aswad, 2006, p. 114; Law, 2010), as those of Arabs or Muslims.<sup>3</sup>

It is just natural that the field of literature and literary studies in the United States is a reflection of the uncertain and relatively unfair status of this minority group. In his 1998 book *The Arab Writer in English*, Geoffrey Nash writes that Anglo Arab writers, be they British or American, are still “anomalous and largely unexplored” (p.1). The situation remains so even in the twenty first century as Arab American writers are regarded as the intruders into the literature of the United States. Commenting on the visibility of Arab American writers in America, Charara (2008) writes:

---

<sup>3</sup> Detailed discussion of how the media and oriental stereotypes vilify the image of Arabs and Arab Americans is in Chapter Two, Section “Racism Against Arab Americans” (p. 59), and Chapter Four, Section “The Confident, Passionate Women of Mohja Kahf” (p. 215).

Yet to most audiences, the presence of so many Arab American writers is typically a source of astonishment. A void exists, yes, but it has very little to do with a lack of writers or writing [...] most anthologies of American literature, fiction or poetry, old or new, unless they deal thematically with Arab Americans [...] rarely include an Arab American writer, much less a number of them—this despite the fact that since September 11, 2001, interest in Arabs and Arab culture is greater than ever before in American history. (p. xxi)

Due to this history of negative representation, Arab-Americans found themselves guilty by association with the all-Arab hijackers and thus possible victims of the “displaced aggression” (Welch, 2006, p. 15; Gualtieri, 2009) of the American society and its mainstream media. So, while American society was eager to know more about the culture to which the hijackers belong, this eagerness made Arab Americans more visible than they have ever been but only to be scapegoated, “feared and deplored” (Salaita, 2005, p. 149; Kaufer and Al Malki, 2009; Charara, 2008; Welch, 2006; Ludescher, 2006).<sup>4</sup>

Being part of this ethnic group, Arab American women writers do not enjoy any better situation in the United States. For even if they are anthologized, they are still relatively absent from literary discourse and criticism in general (Handal, 2001). Because of their invisibility as women writers and as Arab American writers (Majaj as cited in Handal, 2001), and due to what Salaita calls a “dearth” (2007, p. 3) of scholarly work on Arab Americans and Arab American literature, there is a growing need for more work of criticism where Arab American literature is pivotal to the discussion (Handal, 2001; Ludescher, 2006; Gualtieri, 2009). It should be noted here that studying the literature of the United States as multicultural and hence representative of the culture, tradition, and mindset of a variety of ethnic groups is

---

<sup>4</sup> This point is explored further in Chapter Three, Section “War Poetry and Crisis of Iraq” (p. 167).

a new trend in this country (Nelson, 2015). However, demand and quest for serious and scholarly studies of the literature of minority groups in the United States have been growing in the last four decades (Nelson, 2015) as the country starts to look for literary voices outside its canonical literature (Ludescher, 2006) where white men writers dominate the literary scene (Nelson, 2015).

Although studies in Arab American literature are lacking, it is the shortage of studies on Arab American poetry that is more noticeable (Handal, 2001; Ludescher, 2006; Charara, 2008). Reason for this is also related to the what Ludescher (2006) sees as the laconic nature of poetry as opposed to the longer more expressive nature of the novel and the short story. That is, in spite of poetry's ability to convey different messages, including even the controversial political ones (Parini, 2008), for Ludescher (2006) a short poem cannot convey the varied and complex experiences of Arab Americans the way fiction can. This, according to Ludescher (2006) explains why, if any, criticism of Arab American literature is present, it is more concerned with fiction than with poetry (Handal, 2001; Charara, 2008) because fiction can tell more about people's life and experience. When it comes to the poetry that is written by women, however, the situation gets more complex due to the domination of the writing and the voice of the white male (Notley, 2005; Ludescher, 2006; Nelson, 2015); a domination that has sometimes unfairly regarded women's poetry as too emotional and unfit for serious scholarly discussions (Notley, 2005).

The current study is believed to fulfil the need for more critical input that explores the life and the experiences of Arab Americans through investigating the literature produced by writers within this minority group. It does so through thematically studying the poetry of four women poets: the Lebanese American Elmaz Abinader, the Syrian American Mohja Kahf, the Palestinian American Naomi Nye, and the Jordanian American Laila Halaby, who are all contemporary and come from what Majaj (2006) calls "common origin points" (p. 133) i.e.,

the Levant. Examining these poets' prevailing and salient themes: diaspora, war, and women's intimacy, provides contexts for the exploration of Arab American life and experiences and shows the capacity of poetry, particularly women's poetry, as a platform of expression. In addition to that, and through examining these themes, this thesis will highlight these poets' contribution to the American literary tradition and to challenging prejudiced views of Arabs and Arab Americans. Furthermore, in examining the various voices by which these themes are articulated, this thesis is expected to emphasize the diversity in this group's experiences and literature. The close analysis of poetry this thesis offers shows how, by deploying several voices, the four poets act independently and engage realistically in self-interpretation and criticism without succumbing to denigrating stereotypes or even to a pathetic sense of victimization. The literature reviewed here is expected to eventually guide the research towards the study of other issues pertaining to the main themes scrutinized here. Global racism and Islamophobia, for example, will be discussed in Chapter Two "Poetry and the Expression of Diaspora or *Ghourba*" to provide a comprehensive background for better understanding of how, in their varied reaction to racism, the Arab American speakers of the poems shape their hybrid<sup>5</sup> identities in their diaspora in the United States. Similarly, a discussion of trauma theory and its perspectives, along with a discussion of the post-9/11 scapegoating of Arab Americans and Arabs (particularly the Iraqis), are employed to guide the analysis of war poetry in Chapter Three "Poetry and the Expression of War and Trauma". Existing discourses on the monopoly of women's passion and bodies inform the analysis of the poems in Chapter Four "Poetry and the Expression of the Intimate".

---

<sup>5</sup> According to the *Encyclopedia of Identity*, hybridity is "a state of being [that] defines the constantly changing nature of host and home cultures and the... changing lived experiences of the immigrants, diasporic communities, and individuals in host nations". In the case of Arab Americans, the host nation is the United States (Jackson and Hogg, 2010, pp. 338-339).

I find it appropriate here to refer here to the epigram with which I begin this introduction and is taken from a poem that will be discussed fully in Chapter Two. It is spoken on the tongue of a veiled, young, and ambitious Arab American woman who wages a war of words against the intimidating eyes of her American onlooker and refuses to succumb to his racial bullying:

Yes, I carry explosives

They're called words

And if you don't get up

Off your assumptions,

They're going to blow you away. ("*Hijab Scene #7*", Kahf, 2001, p. 39)<sup>6</sup>

It is the power of her word, or rather her poetry, that silences the biased attitude her onlooker has against her hijab. Her words are the "words" of Abinader, Kahf, Nye, and Halaby that have the ultimate dominating power in this thesis. It is their poetry that is going to reveal theirs, and their Arab American group's diverse interests, passions, and agonies. It is through the analysis of their work which is undertaken in this thesis that false "assumptions", or stereotypes, are to be "blow[n] [...] away".

### **The Story of Arab Immigrants to America: From 1908 to the Present**

Handal (2001), Kulczycki & Lobo (2001), Wald (2009) and Ludescher (2006), among other writers, define three flows of Arab migration to the United States. Each flow is linked to a major political event or tension in the Arab region. The first flow corresponds approximately to the weakening and then the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire (1908) and the subsequent World War I (1914–1918). This flow carried unskilled and mostly illiterate Arabs to America (Handal, 2001; Kulczycki & Lobo, 2001; Wald, 2009; Ludescher,

---

<sup>6</sup> Hereafter "*Hijab Scene #7*".

2006). Those early immigrants were eager to Americanize themselves and to immerse themselves in the American “melting pot” (Sandoval and Jendrysik, 1993, p. 304). As most of those immigrants were Christians, they felt more at home in a country where the dominant religion is Christianity as opposed to the Islamic Ottoman Empire from which they emigrated. Regardless of their religion, early immigrants adopt American names and serve with pride the American army. According to Haddad (2011), they:

followed the patterns of integration and assimilation that refashioned them into American citizens. Their names were anglicized: Muhammad became Mo, Rashid became Dick, Mojahid became Mark, and Ali became Al. [...]. Their children went to public schools [...]. They enlisted in the American military during the First and Second World Wars and served with distinction. (pp. 3-4)

The second flow which is marked by improved national Pan-Arab awareness corresponds to the end of World War II (1939–1945) and the simultaneous Israeli occupation of Palestine in 1948 which turned the year 1948 into a “legacy” for Arabs, particularly the Palestinians, in the region and in the diaspora<sup>7</sup> (Yehudai, 2006, p. 108). Commenting on how the occupation of Palestine has always engaged Arabs, Halliday (2013) writes that the “most unresolved, and bitter, legacy [...], the one that more than any other, [...] was to affect Arab opinion, was that of Palestine” (p. 439).<sup>8</sup> This subsequent flow carried immigrants who were mostly educated and skilled. They also possessed stronger awareness of their Arab roots than those of the first flow before them (Ludescher, 2006). Arabs who migrated to the United States following the

---

<sup>7</sup> Full definition of the word “diaspora” is provided in Chapter Two, Section “Diaspora vs. *Ghourba*: An Etymological Discussion” (p. 44).

<sup>8</sup> The Arab-Israeli conflict is part of the discussions of Chapter Two and Chapter Three, in Sections “*Ghourba* in Arabia: From the Pre-Islamic Era (6<sup>th</sup> Century A.D.) to Present” (p. 45), and Section “From the *Safar Barlik* (1912) to the US-led War on Iraq (2003): Ceaseless Traumas” (p. 123) respectively.

Arab-Israeli 1967 War were not only educated and skilled but also highly politicised, devoting themselves to defending Arab perspectives and changing perceptions of Arabs (Ludescher, 2006).

### **Arab American Writers and Writing**

In 1914, Amin Fairs Rihani (1876-1940) and Gibran Khalil Gibran<sup>9</sup> (1883-1931) became part of the immigrant writers, or *Al Mahjar*<sup>10</sup> group of Anglo Arab writers in the West. They were sure that a day would come when first Arab American immigrants will prosper and multiply to give birth to a subtle group of writers, though a minority, in the United States of America. Steven Salaita, the executive director of the literary organization Radius of Arab American, believes that it is Rihani and Gibran who contributed consciously and unconsciously to the Arab American literary growth in the United States (Salaita, 2007). That is because these two writers were the founders of the first “literary society in New York” called “Arrabitah (The Pen Bond) in 1912” (Salaita, 2007, p. 14). Not only are they the founders of such society, but also Rihani and Gibran’s prose writing, especially their English novels, are considered as marking the penetration of the novel into “Arab literary consciousness” (Orfalea, 2006, p. 115).

Orfalea (2006) and Salaita (2007), whose work will be discussed in this thesis, would rarely be opposed by other critics whose work will be incorporated here. Understandably, the bilingual Rihani and Gibran, who are most celebrated as Arab immigrant writers, would be a

---

<sup>9</sup> Spelling of Arabic names may vary as in the case here of the name Jibran which might also be spelled as Gibran. I will adhere to the spelling as used by the authors of the different quoted texts but will use Gibran as a personal choice throughout the thesis.

<sup>10</sup> Arabic for place of migration. The term *Al Mahjar* literature is formally used to refer to the societies of Arab writers who reside in the West, particularly in the United States of America and South America and writing in Arabic language or cultivating their literary experience in their places of migration (Reynolds, 2015).



source of inspiration whether directly or indirectly to Arab American literary endeavors in the United States. Additionally, for these two writers to be concerned with, and be able to establish a literary society as old as The Pen Bond or “Arrabitah” in the cosmopolitan New York is evidence of their intellectual interests. It is also a proof that Arab Americans have been there in America writing and contributing to the intellectual life in this country, even if this contribution was only limited according to Salaita (2007; 2011). Although now viewed as unreasonably flattering of the United States and loaded with texts that are couched to win the acceptance of this country and its readership (Hassan, 2008; Al Maleh, 2009), the writings of Rihani and Gibran cannot be denied their right as foundational of Arab American literary tradition in the United States. Rihani’s *Myrtle and Myrrah* (1905) is the first collection of Arab American poetry and is written by Rihani himself. This writer who has also given Arab American drama its first play; his play *Wajdah* (1909), is also a critic and is considered as the first Arab American English travelogue’s writer (Hassan, 2008). Gibran’s *The Prophet* (1923) is still a source of inspiration for many Arabs and Arab American writers.

### **Arab American Literature: Characteristics, Themes and Phases**

Some critics (Handal, 2001; Ludescher, 2006; Wald, 2009) identify general themes of interest to Arab American writers. The themes of the founding fathers of the first phase are conformist in nature. That is to say, Amin Rihani and Khalil Gibran concerned themselves with addressing a traditional Western readership that sees the East, the Arab world included, through the lenses of Orientalists (Nash, 1998). These lenses, as Edward Said suggests in his seminal work *Orientalism* (1979), consistently see the East, or the Orient, as exotic, mystic, mysterious, brutal, and necessarily backward. As if not to disturb that audience, defined as “cultic” by Nash (1999, p. 12), both Rihani and Gibran reintroduced to and re-promoted among their American readers the same “interest in Eastern religion and mysticism”

(Ludescher, 2006, p. 96; Al Maleh, 2009). Nash (1998) uses the following reaction by Rihani towards an American staging of *The Arabian Nights* against Rihani himself:

The “sheikh”, the harem of the “sheikh”, the luxury and glamour of the desert dwelling of the “sheikh”, and the little army of fierce-looking knights, on the swiftest dromedaries of the most fiery Arab steeds, in quest of the European girl of the harem [...] —nothing is more thrilling, more bewitching in the pages of fiction or on the screen, nothing is more poignantly pathetic in reality. (cited in p. 35)

Even though Rihani concludes his comment on that staging with what seems to be a rejection of the “pathetic” production, the exotic description of “sheikh”s and “harem” along with the conforming sexy, mysterious, and inferior image of the “fierce-looking knights” in “quest of the European girl” are stronger in effect than his rejection. In fact, Rihani’s place as “an exotic writer and reporter on Arabian culture” (Nash, 2009, p. 209), a place he designated for himself in the United States, drives me to take the comment he makes more as aligning with Orientalist readings of the Orient than not.

One can say that in a way, as the founders of the Arab American literary tradition, Rihani and Gibran did not substantially contribute to altering the existing Orientalist image of the East or the Arabs. In many cases, as in the case of Gibran, aloofness from the concerns of the Arab world is a distinct feature of his writing, and in the case of Rihani, the concern is to romanticize the already romanticized East (Nash, 1999; 2009; Hassan, 2008). Additionally, being concerned with satisfying their cultic readers, Rihani and Gibran focus on harmonizing the relationship between the East and the West. They would resolve the existing tension between the two polar opposites either fictitiously through an affair between an Arab man and an American woman (Nash, 1998) as Rihani did in his most famous novel *The Book of Khalid* (1911), or through travelling or staying in the United States with an American mistress (Nash, 1998) as Gibran in fact did. By doing this, Rihani and Gibran thought that

they were winning the acceptance of the West while also “penetrating” (Nash, 1998, p. 30) that West even if only symbolically. Nash (1998), Ludescher (2006), and Al Maleh (2009) criticize early Arab American writers for their conformist writings that reinforce Orientalist fantasies about the East as if to avoid invalidating Orientalist depiction of that region. Hassan (2008) describes this tendency among the early Arab American writers who:

accepted the Orientalist distinction between the contrasting essences of East and West: the former seen as passive, mystical, spiritual, traditional, and backward, and the latter correspondingly as aggressive, rational, materialistic, modern, and progressive. (p. 251)

In fact, Hassan lists Rihani and Gibran among those early Arab-American writers. Rihani has indeed gone too far in his advocacy of the superiority of the West, particularly the United States, to the extent that he called for an American intervention in the politics of the Arab world, one that would untie the region under what Rihani fantasized as The United Arab States (Hassan, 2008).

Handal (2001) mentions Afifa Karam (1883-1924) and Etel Adnan (b. 1925) as the first American women writers of Arab descent. It is true that being first grants Karam a special place as an Arab American poet (Talhami, 2012), as her texts are mainly written in Arabic and then translated into English (Handal, 2001). However, the multilingual “poet, novelist, and painter” (Talhami, 2012, p. 195) Adnan is remembered for her classical novel *Sitt Marie Rose* (1978) (Lady Marie Rose) (Talhami, 2012; Charara, 2008). She is additionally among the first Arab American women to publish a collection of poetry; her *Moonshots* (1966) (Ruschkowski, 2017). The Palestinian issue and the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990) play a significant role in the poetry of Adnan. However, Adnan, who perceives herself as an English author, and who is fascinated by her life in the United States, sounds critical of herself being “part of what *they* call ‘Arab-American literature’” (Robertson, 2014,

p. 105, emphasis mine). She could be excluding herself from the virtual literary ghetto Arab Americans have been placed in even though she is believed to contribute to American literary culture from within that ghetto. Adnan's attitude highlights the plight of Arab American literature that is struggling to be acknowledged as part of the American literary tradition (Al Maleh, 2009). According to Handal (2001), most of the poetry that is produced by Arab American women is barely three decades old. Nevertheless, the literary scene which is championed by Arab American writers continues to grow.

The generation of Arab American writers who succeeded Rihani, Gibran, Karam, and Adnan were American citizens by birth. Some volunteered to serve in the army of the United States during World War II (1939–1945) and exhibited pride about it (Ludescher, 2006; Al Maleh, 2009). Prominent writers of this group are Vance Bourjaily, William Peter Blatty, and Eugene Paul Nassar (Shakir, 1991; Ludescher, 2006). In their autobiographical fictions, both Bourjaily and Blatty offer an example of an Arab American when s/he is overwhelmed or even embarrassed by his/her Arab origin (Ludescher, 2006; Hassan, 2008; Al Maleh, 2009). In Bourjaily's novel *Confessions of a Spent Youth* (1960), the protagonist declares that he has no heritage and that his mixed ethnic background is meaningless to him. His knowledge of Arabic is based on what American schools offer in classes and is hence replete with negative stereotypes that form the protagonist's perception of his own people back in the Arab world (Shakir, 1991). The Arab American protagonist of Blatty's *Which Way to Mecca, Jack?* (1959) is even worse in his attitude toward his Arabic root which seems to embarrass him and be a source of humiliation to him. The mother in this autobiographical work by Blatty, who is the conveyer of the protagonist's heritage, is portrayed, according to Shakir (1991), in a "grotesque, [and] bizzar" way (p. 9). Although Nassar is more in harmony with his Arab ethnic background, his works fail to convey a relaxed feeling about the hybridity of the Arab American community. In fact, he neither touches upon themes relevant to the hybrid life in

the United States, nor does he engage in the treatment of themes relevant to the perception of Arab Americans or the Arabs in the United States (Shakir, 1991).

One can say that if early Arab American writers end up conforming to the already existing stereotypes about the East and the Arabs, hence introducing nothing substantial about Arabs or the East to the American literary tradition, the writers that follow them, among them are Bourjaily, Blatty, and Nassar, are not better. To those writers who are obviously keen in assimilating themselves to American values and lifestyle (Sandoval and Jendrysik, 1993), the East and the Arab world are embarrassing components which they prefer to remain away from. In fact, deracinating themselves from their Arab roots labels this group of writers.

The pressure of the demeaning stereotypes that already existed in the United States even before any Arab immigrant trod the American soil could partly explain the attitude of those early Arab American writers. These stereotypes are legacy of “18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century European depictions of the Orient” (Nelson, 2015, p. 79, Said, 1979) as the strange Other which timelessly indulges itself in harem sensuality and is inferior, sinful, and brutal (Said, 1979; Shakir, 1991; Salaita, 2006; Shaheen, 2009; Nelson, 2015). These, and the overall racist atmosphere, which facilitates the continuity of such degrading tropes<sup>11</sup>, in the United States could be reasons why early Arab Americans reacted in this way. Additionally, in arriving or being in what will become their “dwelling place”,<sup>12</sup> those immigrants, like others before them, would face many obstacles of relocation and readjustment. Economic needs, the language barrier, and the new cultural and religious constructs of the society in the United States do not resemble the Arab ones. Also, adapting themselves and their families to these

---

<sup>11</sup> The Section entitled “Racism Against Arab Americans” in Chapter Two (p.59) explores this point.

<sup>12</sup> I borrow this term from James Proctor’s *Dwelling Places* (2003). More details in the introduction of Chapter Two (p. 41).

new constructs was a real dilemma for the first and the second generation of Arab immigrants in particular.

Findings of Marcus Lee Hansen (1938) that pertain to tracing the attitude of three generations of immigrants to the United States assist in putting Arab American on a wider immigrational context. Hansen argues that any first generation of immigrants tries to maintain social equilibrium by setting boundaries between the world outside family home which should adhere to the standards of the new place, and the family home where members should preserve and observe the traditions of the land of the forefathers. To resolve the conflict of “navigating ... two different cultural contexts” (Chun and Mobley, 2014, p. 341) and leading what they feel as a double-faced lifestyle, the second generation, or the offspring of the first group of immigrants, would conform with the lifeways of those who are constructed as indigenous people. In the process, they:

forget everything: the foreign language that has left an unmistakable trace in his English speech, the religion that has continually recalled childhood struggles, the family customs that should have been the happiest of all memories [...] the second generation wanted to forget [...] to lose as many of the evidences of foreign origin as they could shuffle off. (Hansen, 1938, p. 7)

This could also explain the attitude of the second generation of Arab Americans who deracinated themselves and even felt embarrassed by their Arab roots. They simply felt the pressure of ambivalent lifestyle that the founding fathers led and found a solution in fully embracing the lifestyle of the people they are among, the Americans, and in the only home they know: The United States of America.

The Palestinian- Israeli conflict of the 1967 was a turning point in the Arab region. As it heightened Pan-Arab feeling among Arabs, its effect was even felt by Americans of Arab descent in the United States who consider themselves part of a “Pan-Arab diaspora”, (Kaufer

and Al Malki, 2009, p. 61). While being aware of the American-Israeli alliance in a place held sacred to Arabs and Muslims alike, those Arab Americans became sceptical of the political US agenda in dealing with the Palestinian-Israeli conflict (Kaufer and Al Malki, 2009). In fact, this support created among Arab Americans a sense of solidarity that rarely existed with the first cohort of immigrants. It also resulted in strengthening the Arab half in their Arab American identity (Charara, 2008; Wald, 2009) as well as politicizing that identity (Nelson, 2015, p.74; Nash, 2007; Charara, 2008). Understandably, this made the Palestinian-Israeli conflict an area where Arab Americans converge whether in their writings or their political stands in which they often side with the Palestinians (Sandoval and Jendrysik, 1993; Ludescher, 2006).

It should be noted here, however, that by that time, the third generation of Arab diaspora in the United States has already entered the scene. According to Hansen (1938), the deracination experienced by the second generation gives way to a more optimistic turn in the consciousness of the third generation in the diaspora and:

with the third generation appears a new force and a new opportunity which, if recognized in time, can not only do a good job salvaging but probably can accomplish more than either the first or the second could ever have achieved. (p. 9)<sup>13</sup>

An illustration of this explanation by Hansen (1938) can be seen in the ongoing growth of Arab American writers following the 1967 Israeli-Palestinian and the Gulf War (1991).

Although this complicates the situation for Arab Americans in the United States, it can also be considered as a blessing in disguise. Political tension matured and ripened Arab

---

<sup>13</sup> In a study entitled “Do First Generation Immigrant Adolescents Face Higher Rates of Bullying, Violence and Suicidal Behaviours Than Do Third Generation and Native Born?” light is shed on the mature and more balanced and harmonious experiences of the third-generation immigrants youths compared to their peers from earlier generations and to those of the non-immigrants (Pottie *et al.*, 2015).

Americans' consciousness in the sense that members of this minority group become neither passive nor embarrassed by their roots but proud and critical at the same time (Sandoval and Jendrysik, 1993; Ludescher, 2006). Their texts become mature, neither meaninglessly defensive nor apologetic of the Arab part in their identity (Charara, 2008, p. xxx).

The 1980s witnessed the publication of poetry that is written by Arab American women among whom are Elmaz Abinader, Mohja Kahf, Naomi Nye, and Laila Halaby (Handal, 2001). Their poems are highly reactive to what is happening in the Arab world and to Arab Americans in the United States. They inform, negotiate, debate, and get involved in different topics without injecting needless pathos into the context of their poetry. They never lose sight of the Palestinian issue, neither do they ignore other political issues in the Middle East. Political issues in Palestine, Lebanon, and Iraq are present in almost all the chapters of this thesis, particularly Chapter Two and Chapter Three. They condemn and criticize any conflict that brings about misery in the region even when the US is involved. Rarely do they compromise to escape their complex status as not pure Americans. In a poem ironically entitled "Knowing" (Nye, 2011, p. 43)<sup>14</sup>, Eleanor Roosevelt, who is the central addressee in the poem, only demonstrates ignorance when addressed by the Arab American speaker. The irony in the title and the portrayal of the First Lady of the United States, who was known for her humanitarian interests, is contrasted with her ignorance and bias towards the misery of a nation, and is meant to highlight the plight of the Palestinian people whose subjugation by the Israeli is orchestrated by the United States:

No [...] I do not think Arab refugees  
Should be permitted to return to their homes  
[...]

---

<sup>14</sup> Hereafter "Knowing".



2. I do not know if it is advisable

To internationalize Jerusalem.

[...]

3. I do not know if there should be an Arab Palestine (“Knowing”)

The First Lady’s “do not know[s]” question the American consciousness and confront it with the moral dilemma of a people towards whose crisis the Americans pretend to be ignorant, yet, whose oppression and dislocation they support.

Additionally, aloofness or embarrassment from scenes and issues of the Arab world is not a trend among the third phase group of writers to whom Elmaz Abinader, Mohja Kahf, Naomi Nye, and Laila Halaby belong. Unlike Rihani and Gibran of the first phase writers, Abinader, Kahf, Nye, and Halaby do not use the harem stereotype or idealize the United States. Neither do these women poets deracinate themselves, like many writers of the second phase, to erode their Arab half from their Arab American identity. One of Kahf’s speakers, Mahmud, still reminds us of the founding fathers who idealized the United States, “Dear Mom, I landed in America—/ might as well say the moon/ The air is a different element/ The cars are new and shiny like jewels/ [...] Jordan’s just a speck on the Map” (“Mahmud’s First Letter Home from Minneapolis”, Kahf, 2001, p. 36). However, most of her speakers are proud of their Arab heritage. There is Fatima, a new Arab immigrant and a universal woman who carries within the folds of her Arab dress “Eve”, “Zainab”, “Hagar”, “the veil of the Queen of Sheba”, the “dagger from Shajarat al-Dur”, and the wealthy heritage of other women from the East (“Fatima Migrates in October”, Kahf, 2003, pp. 85-87)<sup>15</sup>. There is also the haughty Arab grandmother who, guiltlessly, washes her feet in the sink of Sears and warns her astonished American onlookers that her “feet are cleaner than their sink” (“My

---

<sup>15</sup> Hereafter “Fatima”.

Grandmother Washes Her Feet”, Kahf, 2003, pp. 26-28)<sup>16</sup>. If the Arab American novelist William Peter Blatty is embarrassed of his Arab roots while fully embracing his Americanness, an Arab American speaker, does the opposite in Laila Halaby’s poem “the journey” (2012, pp. 9-17)<sup>17</sup>. After a visit to Jordan and before returning to the United States, this speaker “cremated [her] Americanness/ flung it from the top of the castle in Ajlun/ tossed it into the Dead Seas/ drowned it off a boat on Aqaba/ buried it near the ruins in Um Qais” (“journey”), she does this as if to purify herself from what she thinks are her “American” imperfections. By these she means, her American nationality, her American friends, and her American education.<sup>18</sup>

Unlike the founding fathers Rihani and Khalil Gibran who acquired from their western “dwelling place”<sup>19</sup> the enchantment of *The Arabian Nights* to fall into the trap of orientalizing the already orientalized East (Nash, 1998), Abinader, Kahf, Nye, and Halaby do not mystify that East to conform to an Orientalist pleasure. Even if the mist of the East tints Mohja Kahf’s *Emails from Scheherazade* (2003), this mist is there, as the discussion in Chapter Four shows, in order to deconstruct the sensual and mystifying image of the Orient and to redefine its most seminal character, Scheherazade, on prosaic bases.

### **Arab and Arab American Women Poets: From 575 A.D. to the Present**

As this thesis concerns itself with the examination of the poetry of Arab American women, it is appropriate for its sake to: first, review the poetry of the founding mothers in Arabia; and second, to review the poetry of their female offspring in the diaspora in the United States. If

---

<sup>16</sup> Hereafter “My Grandmother”.

<sup>17</sup> Hereafter “journey”.

<sup>18</sup> This poem is also discussed in Chapter Two, Section “Diaspora is Pain: Antagonism as a Survival Model” (p.73), and Section “Food to Fight Forgetfulness” (p. 110).

<sup>19</sup> Proctor (2003).

modern Arabic and English libraries have few anthologies of Arab, or Arab American women poets (Handal, 2001; Darraj, 2004; Charara, 2008; Nelson, 2015), the heritage that both Arab and Arab American women poets draw from in terms of talent and experience as poets and critics is a rich one.

### **The Literary Scenes in Arabia**

Al-Khansa'a (575–646), Rabia'a al-Adawyyah (712–801), and Walladah bin al-Mustakfi (d. 1091), are three Arab women poets whose names are embossed on the collective Arab memory as ancient examples of women who mastered and wove words to perfection while standing out, each in her own way, among the men and the women of their eras. Al-Khansa'a would beat men poets; Rabia'a al-Adawyyah is the mother of Sufi poetry; and Walladah bint al-Mustakfi the princess, is also a bisexual poet. Although they belong to different eras in Arab history, what unites these three women is not only the word but also its power and boldness.

Arabs know al-Khansa' as the first woman poet to be remembered in Arabia. An interesting story is told about this articulate and bold poet. In this story, when al-Khansa' was participating in the annual poetry contest Arabs used to hold during Okaz heritage days, she met al-Nabigha al-Thubiani (535–604), a seminal Arab poet. The story continues that when seeing al-Khansa' al-Nabigha said, “If Abu Basir [...] had not already recited me, I would have said you are the greatest poets of the Arabs. Go, for you are the greatest poet among those with breasts ‘. Al-Khansa' replied, 'I'm the greatest poet among those with testicles, too'” (Cited in Ashour, Ghazoul, and Mekdashi, 2007, p.1). It could thus be said that as early as the eighth century, a woman poet of the deserts of Arabia bequeathed to her sisters a legacy that transcends the poetic of the word to include, as well, freedom of expression, one that can go as extreme as trading “testicles” for “breasts”.

Rabia'a al-Adawyyah whose life is still a mystery, but whose poetry of mysticism is deemed as the first in the field, defines the beauty and the freedom of the word in a different way. At times when Muslims were still defining their relationship with God in orthodox or fundamental ways that draw straight from Holy Scriptures, she personalized and philosophized her relationship with the divine and set that into poetry. More than one hagiographical reference calls her the first *Sufi* (Campo, 2009; El Sakakkini, 1982). Among the pioneers is also Walladah bint al-Mustakfi of al-Andalus. Walladah is a princess poet who used part of the property she inherited from her father to “open a palace & [*sic.*] literary hall in Córdoba” (Joris and Tengour, 2013, p. 71; Handal, 2011). Although her love poetry is known to be addressed to her lover Ibn Zaidun, yet, rumors say that Walladah was involved in a homosexual love story and that some of her love poetry is dedicated to her woman lover (Stephan, 2006). So full and proud of herself, this princess poet carried her art to extremes when she had lines of her own self-celebrating poetry embroidered on the sides of her dress (Ashour, Ghazoul, and Mekdashi, 2007; Joris and Tengour, 2013).

Two books can also be mentioned here where women poets occupy a prominent place in Arab history. *Rayyel sama fi man Kala al-Shiar min a-Ima'a (Thirst-Quenching Excerpts from Lives of Slave Girl Poets)*<sup>20</sup> by Abil Faraj al-Asfahani (897–967) and *Nessau al-Khulafa (The Consorts of the Caliphs)*<sup>21</sup> by Ibn al-Sai (1197–1276). The first book could be seen as unique in the sense that it captures the life and the poetry of a special class of women, who, in spite of their status as slaves, were equal to, if not better than, men poets (Ashour, Ghazoul, and Mekdashi, 2007, p. 2). The latter by Ibn al-Sai includes stories of intellectual women, among them are women poets, who were prominent figures in Baghdad during the Abbasid Caliphate (Ibn al-Sai, no date). These two books by al-Asfahani and Ibn al-Sai could be

---

<sup>20</sup> Translation of this title is by Ashour, Ghazoul, and Mekdashi (2007, p. 2).

<sup>21</sup> Translation of this title is by Shawkat Toorawa (2017). See Ibn al-Sai in the Bibliography.

viewed as early recorded work of history, not of fiction, that can refute age-old and contemporary stereotypes of women, particularly Arab women or women from the East. The stereotypes that portrays them as mere objects whose sphere is so domesticated that it can barely let them transcend as masters of words and actions as opposed to their rivals of men.

The Mongol conquest of Baghdad in the 13<sup>th</sup> Century, eventually leading to the end of the culturally prosperous Abbasid period (750-1517), would mark a serious “deterioration and disintegration” (Ashour, Ghazoul, and Mekdashi, 2007, p. 178) of the Arab enlightenment that would last for centuries, impacting more seriously “the weaker segment of the society, particularly women” (Ashour, Ghazoul, and Mekdashi, 2007, p. 178; Handal, 2001). Confined to their homes and with limited chances of education (unless through foreign schools), Arab women poets became a rarity (Ashour, Ghazoul, and Mekdashi, 2007). Despite the rarity, an Iraqi woman poet, Nazik al-Malaika (1923–2007) would contend with Iraqi men and be a pioneer in modernizing Arabic poetry through the introduction of the free verse poetry to the Arabic poetic tradition (Talhami, 2012). al-Malaika was a translator and an innovative and intellectual critic of poetry whose work has been translated into several languages (Altoma, 1997). By the end of World War I (1914–1918), Maryana Marrash in Aleppo, Princess Nazli Fadil in Cairo, and Alexandra Khuri in Alexandria would host literary salons to contribute to intellectual life in the Arab world (Ashour, Ghazoul, and Mekdashi, 2007; Handal, 2001)<sup>22</sup>.

---

<sup>22</sup> It should be noted here that as early as the 8<sup>th</sup> and the 11<sup>th</sup> Centuries, the dwellings of Sukaynah bint al-Husayn and Walladah bin al-Mustakfi were hubs of intellectual life where the two women poets themselves were consulted by the great minds of their time in literary and intellectual matters (Al Barjal, 2016; Ashour, Ghazoul, and Mekdashi, 2007; Handal, 2001).

### **The Literary Scenes in the United States of America**

Handal (2001), Darraj (2004), Ludescher (2006), Charara (2008), and Nash (2012) agree that in recent years, probably starting from 1990 (Ludescher ,2006), Arab American writing has grown in abundance. According to Ludescher (2006), searching “for voices outside the traditional canon of Anglo-American male literature” (p. 106), and “paradoxically, the events of 9/11” (p. 106) both contributed to better awareness and production of works by and about Arab American writers. Yet, rarely does one find an American man or woman poet from an Arab descent who has been anthologized (Handal, 2001; Darraj, 2004; Charara, 2008; Nelson, 2015).

Notwithstanding that, Arab American writers did anthologize and critique themselves. Gregory Orfalea’s *Wrapping the Grape Leaves: A Sheaf of Contemporary Arab-American Poets* (1982), and his and Sharif Elmusa’s *Grape Leaves: A Century of Arab-American Poetry* (1988) are probably the oldest anthologies which bring together most of the prominent poets, men and women, who are “US citizens of Arab ancestry and had work published in at least three literary magazines or one book” (Boullata, 1990, p. 156–157). According to Ludescher (2006), the publication of both anthologies by Orfalea and Elmusa is a milestone in the Arab American literary tradition. That is because these anthologies created a substantial place for Arab American literature “on computer databases and in card catalogues” (Majaj as cited in Ludescher, 2006, p. 103). Following these anthologies is Nathalie Handal’s *The Poetry of Arab Women: A Contemporary Anthology* (2001) which devotes a chapter to Arab American poetry that is written by women. And following Handal’s is Hayan Charara’s *Inclined to Speak: An Anthology of Contemporary Arab American Poetry* (2008) that includes the poetry of several Arab American women poets. Both Handal (2001) and Charara (2008) agree that Arab American poets contribute not only to enriching the literary scenes in the United States but also fighting the erroneous representation of the Orientalists that is “so deeply entrenched... perhaps even more so than it

did when *Orientalism* was published in 1978” (p. xvii). In fact, contemporary Arab American poets like Etel Adnan, Kazim Ali, Sharif Elmusa, Suhair Hammad, Nathalie Handal, Lawrence Joseph, Khaled Mattawa, Deema Shehabi, and many others, add new and untraditional voices to the Anglo-American canon. They do that through engaging themselves with examining their cultures and their diasporic experiences and hybridity without absenting themselves from the political scenes of the Arab world and the United States.

Despite the publication of the abovementioned four anthologies of contemporary Arab American poetry, and the many independent books and poems published separately by the writers themselves, there still is a gap in the studies and the critiques of Arab American poetry. And although the 9/11 terrorist attacks escalated interest in studies about Arab Americans (Ludescher, 2006; Al Maleh, 2009; Nelson, 2015), the focus of these studies remains, as stated earlier in this introduction, on fiction. Furthermore, books like *Contemporary Arab American Women Writers* (Abdelrazek, 2007), and *Arab Women Writers: A Critical Reference Guide, 1873-1999* (Ashour, Ghazoul, and Reda-Mekdash, 2007) treat texts produced by women writers regardless of the genre. As its title implies, *Arab American Literary Fictions, Cultures, and Politics* by Steven Salaita (2007) is interested in the study of fiction by Arab American writers, both men and women. *Arab Voices in the Diaspora: Critical Perspectives on Anglophone Literature* (Al Maleh, 2009) is a collection of essays that fathom different themes and concerns that are treated in the writings by writers who write in English be they Arab Americans or Anglo Arabs. Geoffrey Nash’s *The Arab Writers in English: Arab Themes in a Metropolitan Language* (1998), *The Anglo-Arab Encounter: Fiction and Autobiography by Arab Writers in English* (2007), and his *Writing Muslim Identity: The Construction of Identity* (2012) are also concerned with Anglo Arab writers and issues pertaining to their status as immigrants or as members of a racial group in

the English-speaking countries. Nash's books are also interested in the analysis of Anglo Arab fiction and prose writing over poetry.

As suggested earlier in this chapter, there are few scholarly studies of Arab American women's poetry. In the process of writing this thesis, reference is made to three scholarly monographs in the field. The doctoral theses of both Christina Larose (2018) and Safa'a Abdulrahim (2013) are about Arab American women's poetry. Larose's (2018) study is concerned with the portrayal of violence and peace as represented in Arab American poetry that is written by thirteen women from the Levant. Abdulrahim's (2013) dissects identity matters in the poems written by some contemporary Arab American women poets. In her master's thesis, Lamees Al-Athari (2008) studies the poetry of one contemporary Arab American woman poet: Dunya Mikhail.<sup>23</sup>

### **Elmaz Abinader, Mohja Kahf, Naomi Nye, and Laila Halaby**

There is consensus among critics of Arab American literature that Naomi Shihab Nye (b. 1952) is the most prominent and prolific contemporary Arab American woman writer (Handal, 2001; Charara, 2008; Nelson, 2015). Her novel *Habibi* (1997) is "widely acknowledged as the first young adult novel by an Arab American novelist" (Nelson, 2015, p.77). Born in 1952 to a Palestinian father and an American mother, the poet, editor, and fiction writer Nye does not lose sight of her Palestinian roots although hers is a worldwide context (Charara, 2008). Handal (2001) believes that Nye, however, attains "a wholeness rare among Arab-Americans" (p. 51) which is seen in her poetry. She neither "celebrates malice nor encourages anger or violence" (Al Maleh, 2009, p. 39). In a way, one can say that Nye,

---

<sup>23</sup> Beyond the scope of women's poetry, there are other theses published in the field of Arab American literature. The doctoral thesis of Nedhal Moqbel (2014), for instance, studies Arab American political poetry disregarding the gender of the poets.



whose veins run with both Palestinian and American blood, is involved naturally and genetically with the most urgent issue in the Arab and the international worlds: the prolonged Palestinian-Israeli conflict (1948-Present). However, her awareness of the United States' large-scale support of Israel is "one of the most salient features in U.S. foreign policy" (Zunes, 2002)<sup>24</sup> lets her Arab American speakers resolve their dilemma by being involved more with peacemaking than with blaming either party, the Israeli or the American, for the injustices befalling the Palestinians:

I'm not interested in

Who suffered the most.

I'm interested in

People getting over it ("Jerusalem", Nye, 2002, pp. 92-93)<sup>25</sup>

Nye has more than ten collections of poetry. For the purpose of this thesis, only her most recent *Transfer* (2011), *You and Yours* (2005), and *19 Varieties of Gazelles* (2002) are explored.

When it comes to the Syrian American poet Mohja Kahf (b. 1967), I agree with Nathalie Handal's (2011) description that Kahf, who is also a novelist and a critic, is "very different" (p. 56). A descendent of an educated family who knew several Arab women activists including her mother, aunt, and grandmother (Davis, Zine, and Taylor, 2007), Kahf is relentless in creating Arab American speakers who resonate cultural pride (Davis, Zine, and Taylor, 2007; Handal, 2011). In fact, among the four poets studied in this thesis, Kahf creates speakers that are the most daring, articulate, knowledgeable, and the most erotic.

Earlier in this chapter, we met Fatima, the new Arab immigrant who migrates to the United

---

<sup>24</sup> Details about this conflict are given earlier in this chapter. More can also be found in Chapter Three, Section "From the *Safar Barlik* (1912) to the US-led War on Iraq (2003): Ceaseless Traumas" (p. 123).

<sup>25</sup> Hereafter "Jerusalem".

States so full of her Arab heritage (“Fatima”). We also met the haughty Arab grandmother who guiltlessly washes her feet in the sink of Sears ignoring the reactions of her angry American onlookers (“My Grandmother”). Allusion to the heritage of East is remarkably present in the poetry of Kahf, even in her erotic poetry where the sensual experience turns into an expedition that exposes the bodies of both man and woman for the ultimate goal of satisfying the speaker’s, often a woman, sexual needs and her sense of pride as a dominating person from the East. In populating her poetry with references to the rich culture of the East, Kahf “literary opens up the archive of ... art” (Cariello, 2013, p. 102), as if to indirectly “mock[...] an America so ‘knowledgeable’ yet so profoundly ‘ignorant’ of other culture[s]” (Handal, 2001, p. 56). In the poem “You Are My Yemen” (Kahf, 2003, pp. 48-49)<sup>26</sup>, for example, the body of the lover becomes metonymical of seminal places in the East, “You are my Cairo and my Baghdad/ Your arms are Umayyad minarets/ Your thighs are Tigris and Euphrates”. Where her audience is invited to search for Cairo, Baghdad, the Umayyads, Tigris and Euphrates and be aware of the richness of the East, the speaker takes her time to indulge herself in these and in her lover’s “arms” and “thighs”. To counterargue stereotypes that see in the Islamic veil a symbol of subduing women, Kahf is relentless in creating veiled speakers who are liberal and outspoken. She makes them resist via the act of wearing hijab but frees their bodies and tongues alike. As the discussion of the chapters will show later, the odalisques of “*Thawrah des Odalisques* at the Matisse Retrospective” (Kahf, 2003, p. 64-69)<sup>27</sup> swear and use profane language, yet, before exiting the museum in the dawn of their freedom, some of them decide to wear the hijab and become activists in the society. Kahf’s constant portrayal and involvement with the eroticism of the human body, particularly the body of the woman (Vilarrubias, 2011; Ludescher, 2006) make her speakers the dominant

---

<sup>26</sup> Hereafter “My Yemen”.

<sup>27</sup> Hereafter “*Thawrah*”.

subject of discussion in Chapter Four which is entitled: “Poetry and the Expression of the Intimate”. Kahf’s collection of poetry *Emails from Scheherazad* (2003)<sup>28</sup> is central to discussion in this thesis. As Kahf tries in her poems to reject the Western claim to want to save Arabs, particularly Arab women, and trash the negative stereotypes that are often cast on the East and the Easterners, her collection of poetry can also be viewed as a form of resistance (Abdelrazek, 2007).

When an American nun forced the Lebanese American Elmaz Abinader’s parents to change their daughter’s name to Alma so that the little girl could fit *in* to American society after getting rid of what the nun thought was an exotic name,<sup>29</sup> they unintentionally gave Alma all that she needed for a future in which she would become an Arab American writer, performer, and academic who would never lose sight of Lebanon or the East from which she originates. Her collection of poetry *In the Country of My Dreams* (1999) portrays speakers who are “at peace with [their] heritage. There doesn’t seem to be any conflict vis-à-vis [their] Arab identity” (Handal, 2001, p. 49). Being the daughter of Lebanese immigrants who were diligent in keeping their tradition alive in the privacy of their American home, Elmaz Abinader (b. 1954) has always been aware of her difference. The nun’s change of Elmaz given name to Alma<sup>30</sup> and the difficulty her family has gone through to fit in to life in the United States are constantly present in Abinader’s memory as they are deployed in her poetry. The Otherness her speakers feel would always return us to that nun. We can feel it

---

<sup>28</sup> When I started working on this thesis in 2011, this was Kahf’s only collection of poetry.

<sup>29</sup> *A Date in Exile*, (2007).

<sup>30</sup> In her biography *Children of the Roojme* (Abinader, 1997), Abinader writes about how her relatives used their Lebanese patronyms to name their buildings and shops in Pennsylvania. When a relative asks another why not using “Peter, the American way” instead of the Lebanese “Boutros”, he would reply, “Because Boutros is my name” (p. 254).

with the old gentleman who is still trying to find his way in a place that turns its back on him: “he is tired of being foreign, of trying/ so hard just to breathe, to get a little light/ of his own” (“Living with Opposition”, Abinader, 1999, pp. 61-64)<sup>31</sup>. Her awareness of being branded based on one’s name and physical looks can easily be noticed in the writings of Abinader. In her essay “Profile of an Arab daughter” (Abinader, 2001) having an Arab face in America is a sin that should be hidden. It is inevitable yet is unbearable and is problematic but is also irresolvable:

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.

My mother never considered herself an Arab. “We’re Lebanese, descendants of the Phoenicians” [*sic.*] (np.)

The mother’s reply “We’re [...] Phoenicians” is a denial which tries to heal her daughter after the daughter’s traumatic realization that she has the non-white, suspicious face of an Arab. This feeling has always existed but is pronounced here and elsewhere in the poetry of Elmaz Abinader and the other poets particularly as part of the traumatic consequences of the tragic 9/11 scenes. Even in her most recent poetry collection *This House, My Bones* (2014), Abinader remains concerned with exploring issues pertaining to the life of Arab Americans in the United States and to Arabs’ life in troubled areas in the Arab world. However, in the treatment of these issues, Abinader’s poetry maintains a calm and pensive tone that inhibits violent reactions.

As in her often-quoted novel *Once in a Promised Land* (2007), the Jordanian American Laila Halaby’s collection of poetry *My Name on His Tongue* (2012) is interested in the

---

<sup>31</sup> Hereafter “Opposition”

treatment of the mainstream American belief which claims that it is Arabs, and Arab Americans, that should be feared in America (Nash, 2012). Born in 1966 to a Jordanian father and an American mother, Laila Halaby is the only one among the four poets studied here whose main concern is with the low status of Arab American dwellers of the United States. A feeling of *ghourba* or of being a diasporic subject is prevalent in Halaby's poetry. Her speakers, unlike those of Nye and Kahf, or even of Abinader, rarely feel at peace with their existence in the United States. Anger and agony are expressed on the tongues of her speakers who do not feel that America is also home. In America, her speaker is "born/ out of place/ [...]/ blanketed in foreignness" ("journey"). Identity is always a dilemma and is never resolved in Halaby's poetry. Her speaker feels awkward when someone asks *where are you from?* "most people/ have a simple answer/ a one word/ that conjured home/ [...]/ I don't have/ a Here/ or There/ that tells my truth" ("*di dove sei?*", Halaby, 2012, pp. 20–22)<sup>32</sup>. Ever feeling strangers and "[b]lanketed in foreignness", Halaby's speakers perceive everything about them, even love.

Abinader, Kahf, Nye, and Halabi tailor texts that suit an American audience and take into consideration an Arab audience who speaks English. They do this without alienating themselves from the concerns of the Arab world or those concerns of Americans of Arab descent who live in the United States.

A question posed by Nash (2012) about Anglo-Arab and Muslim writings is: "where in literature are the positive, upbeat, or at least neutrally observant representations of the experience of what it is really like being a Muslim in the West (and Muslim lands) today" (p. 118). This could be said to receive an answer from *Emails from Scheherazade* (2003) by Mohja Kahf. Many poems in this book capture a cheerful sense of optimism and positivity of the hybrid experience of Arab Americans. "Lateefa" (pp. 21–24)<sup>33</sup>, "My Grandmother", "My

---

<sup>32</sup> Hereafter "*di dove sei?*".

<sup>33</sup> Hereafter "Lateefa".

Babysitter Wears a Face-Veil” (pp. 32–33)<sup>34</sup>, “E-mail from Scheherazad” (p. 43)<sup>35</sup>, “*Thawrah*”, and “Fatima” deploy Arab American characters with varied and successful experiences in the United States. Similar poems can also be found in the collections by the other three poets.

From where they are in the United States which is the speakers’ “dwelling place”<sup>36</sup>, homeland becomes larger than the land of a poet’s origin. Rather, it is the Arab world, or the East, to which their poetic consciousness returns for inspiration or for support. In this, Nye, Kahf, Abinader, and Halaby distinguish themselves from the founding fathers Rihani and Gibran who, according to Nash (1998), are aloof from these regions and deal with the Arab world and the Orient as regions that tolerate discussion of sensuality and sexuality.

### **Thesis Structure**

This thesis consists of five chapters. Chapter One, which is the thesis’ “Introduction”, provides a broad definition of who Arab Americans are and sets this minority group within appropriate immigrational, historical, and literary frameworks. This chapter also explains the rationale behind the choice of the poets and the main three themes that are examined in the thesis. As this thesis is mainly concerned with the poetry of Arab American women, further exploration of the poetry produced by women, Arab and Arab American, is also provided in the Introduction. The Introduction briefly reviews other studies and critiques in the field of Arab American literature.

Chapter Two, entitled “Poetry and the Expression of Diaspora or *Ghourba*”, probes diaspora through investigating patterns of adjustment that the Arab American speakers

---

<sup>34</sup> Hereafter “My Babysitter”.

<sup>35</sup> Hereafter “from Scheherazad”.

<sup>36</sup> Proctor (2003).

deploy to identify with their “dwelling place”<sup>37</sup>. Identifying with the “dwelling place”<sup>38</sup>, a main concern for the diasporic subjects, has multiple implications. It means overcoming negative nostalgia and local racism, feeling at home, and tuning down identity ambivalence. The speakers of diaspora poetry considered here have varying reactions to the registers above.<sup>39</sup> Through the analysis of their poetry these reactions will also be treated as demonstrative of the varying experiences of the individuals in their “dwelling places”<sup>40</sup> even if they belong to the same racial group.

Chapter Three, “Poetry and the Expression of War and Trauma”, concerns itself with the study of war, its imagery, and its traumatic experiences as captured in poetry. Patterns of coping with traumatic experience are also investigated in this chapter and scrutinized from both poetic and traumatic perspectives to provide a comprehensive picture of the place war occupies in the poetry of Abinader, Kahf, Nye, and Halaby. The *Safar Barlik* (1912),<sup>41</sup> World War I (1914–1918), The Spanish (1936–1939) and The Lebanese (1975–1990) Civil Wars, the 9/11 attacks (2001), and the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq provide a backdrop for the poetry of war and conflict that is treated in this chapter. Mothers and fathers who survive war and its traumatic experiences are given a special space in this chapter and their parental voice and coping strategies will be compared with those of the younger generation.

---

<sup>37</sup> Proctor (2003).

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> As will be explained in Chapter Two, integration, antagonism, withdrawal, and dissociation-association are among the most persisting survival models the speakers of the four poets will deploy to overcome their diasporic feeling. See Section “Diaspora and Survival: Pain and Balm” (p. 55).

<sup>40</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> More details about the *Safar Barlik* (1912) and the rest of the enlisted wars will be provided in Chapter Three, Section “From the *Safar Barlik* (1912) to the US-led war on Iraq (2003): Ceaseless Traumas” (p. 123).

Chapter Four, “Poetry and the Expression of the Intimate”, explores the women speakers’ personal decisions about intimate subjects such as love and sexuality and the relationship of these to a speaker’s expressivity about her body and its desires, among which is her autonomy in terms of sexual choices. The chapter investigates the relationship between the speaker’s expressivity and her role in the love experience she goes through. The bicultural background of the poets behind these speakers is brought to the table of discussion. Yet, distinctiveness in their reactions to, and their engagement with, private issues such as love, liberty, body, and sex will be discussed in the chapter.

Chapter Five, entitled “Conclusion”, reviews the findings of the three main chapters of the thesis and provides suggestions for further studies in the field of Arab American poetry.

Each chapter begins with an introduction that explores the topic of concern. Arab diasporic experience is treated in Chapter Two. Trauma theory concepts and perspectives provide Chapter Three with the necessary background and terminology for better comprehension of the poems scrutinized. And as for Chapter Four, an exploration of literature that is concerned with discussion of the body and the passion of women is provided before a literary analysis of relevant poetry is undertaken. Each chapter ends with a conclusion that reassesses the analysis provided in the chapters.



## Chapter Two

### Poetry and the Expression of Diaspora or *Ghourba*<sup>42</sup>

“unleash the *ghurba*

I feel it rising, large and fierce,

filling me with an evil mood” (“Eid”, Halaby, 2012, p. 74)

#### Introduction

This chapter probes diaspora through investigating patterns of adjustment that the Arab American speakers deploy to identify with their “dwelling place”<sup>43</sup>. I use two terms: homeland and “dwelling place”<sup>44</sup>, to refer to distinct locations. Homeland is the speakers’ land of origin; the Arab world. The use of the term “dwelling place” is inspired by James Proctor’s *Dwelling Places* (2003) to mean the land in which the speakers live. In the context of my study, this land is the United States. Diaspora is the dialectical state that springs from leaving homeland under different circumstances to become the dweller of another land. This diaspora is existentialist in nature. It describes a state of being which entails a journey to search for life’s meaning outside a person’s point of origin. For these to be accomplished, a person in his/her diaspora is constantly commuting between, and communicating with, homeland and the “dwelling place”<sup>45</sup> physically or emotionally. Identifying with the “dwelling place”<sup>46</sup>, a main concern for diasporic subjects, is multifaceted. It means overcoming negative nostalgia, feeling at home, overcoming local racism, and toning down

---

<sup>42</sup> Arabic for diaspora. An etymological analysis of the term is provided Section “Diaspora vs. *Ghourba*: An Etymological Discussion” (p. 44).

<sup>43</sup> Proctor (2003).

<sup>44</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *ibid.*

identity ambivalence. The speakers of this study of diaspora poetry have varying reactions to the above registers. Some, like Mohja Kahf's Arab American speakers, resolve the situation through integration. Others, such as Naomi Nye's speakers, dissociate themselves from specific diasporic encounters. While Laila Halaby's speakers are the most aggressive in their reaction, Abinader's are the most passive. Regardless of the way they react; all speakers maintain themselves in their "dwelling place"<sup>47</sup> while harboring feeling towards their homeland.

While I agree with Ben-Rafael (2013) and Safran (2004 cited in Ben-Rafael, 2013) that pain is intrinsic to any diasporic experience, I also believe, like Sandoval and Jendrysik (1993) and Pharaon (2008), that this pain varies across groups and individuals and is not necessarily a component that inhibits the progress of the diasporic subjects. Of course, as a minority group in the United States, Arab Americans suffer the pain of the stereotypes that continue to inferiorize Arabs as "barbaric, sexist, and irrational" (Haddad, 2004, p.15). Some complain of being branded as the strangers whose language, appearance, and traditions are aliens to the USA society (Mason and Matella, 2014, p.2). However, while these stereotypes unify them, Arab Americans are distinctive enough as individuals in their reaction to their minority status and in their interaction with the worlds in which they exist. Needless to say, regarding Arab Americans as a monolithic minority is a generalization that will be proven inaccurate in the course of this chapter.

In order to achieve a comprehensive analysis of the diaspora poetry, this chapter aims at answering the following questions: What is the etymological analysis of the term diaspora and of its Arabic counterpart, *ghourba*? What attributions to *ghourba* does the connotational meaning in Arabic suggest? How is diaspora, or *ghourba*, rooted in Arab history and poetry?

---

<sup>47</sup> *ibid.*

What is global racism and to what extent does it influence Arab Americans' diaspora? With racism as a strong stressor in people's lives, how do Arab American speakers react to their diasporic experience and interact with life in the "dwelling place"<sup>48</sup>? What patterns of adjustment do the Arab American speakers of the poetry this chapter scrutinizes deploy in order to resolve pressing diasporic issues in their "dwelling place"<sup>49</sup>? How do these speakers vary? What role do homeland markers, like history and cuisine, sustain the speakers and empower them in their "dwelling place"<sup>50</sup>?

To answer these questions, the chapter begins with an etymological discussion of the term diaspora and its Arabic counterpart *ghourba*. To set the mode for the discussion of Arabic diaspora, this chapter then provides a concise cultural history of diaspora poetry in Arabia before moving onto the poetry of diaspora produced by poets whose work is the focus of this study. The chapter then discusses diaspora poetry and focuses on the speakers' individual experience of settlement in the "dwelling place"<sup>51</sup>. It also studies the speakers' deployment of survival strategies that make them distinctive from each other. The last part of the chapter analyses Arab Americans' markers or symbols of cultural pride as presented in the poems of diaspora. These are images of history and gastronomical or food imagery. The chapter concludes with the finding that even if Arab American poets have a shared common background, they vary considerably in their overall diasporic and "dwelling place"<sup>52</sup> experiences.

---

<sup>48</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.*

### **Diaspora vs. *Ghourba*: An Etymological Discussion**

Although dictionaries like the *American Heritage* and *Oxford English Dictionary* ascribe the history of being scattered around the world to the exile of the Jews of the 6<sup>th</sup> Century BC <sup>53</sup>, the term is still widely used to mean people from other nations who are destined to live outside their homelands. According to Ben-Rafael (2013), Smith (2007) and Cohen (1996), that the term “diaspora,” if interpreted outside the religious context, means any human being who lives outside his/her country of origin regardless of the circumstances of dispersal. Arabs use the word *ghourba* in the same sense. When defining the Arab Diaspora, Al-Samman (2015), and Salhi (2006) agree that Arabs, whether they are in a forced or a self-chosen exile, still belong to the Arab Diaspora as long as they do not return to live in their country of origin.

Etymologically speaking, “diaspora” originates from Greek and is made up of two parts “dia” which means “across” and “speirein” which means to “scatter.” Therefore, the term diaspora means “to scatter across” regardless of any condition that caused that state of being. It evokes “a plethora of global migration, not just Jewish” but also “Lebanese, [and] Palestinian” (Procter, 2003, p.13) and others. *Lisan al-Arab* of the lexicographer Ibn Manzur (1291-1369) and the more modern *Almujam Alwaseet* (2004) (both are Arabic dictionaries) agree that *gha-ra-ba* as a root of the term *ghourba* means to “alienate yourself from people,” <sup>54</sup> or to “travel away from your homeland” <sup>55</sup> without making any reference to the act of

---

<sup>53</sup> In his article “Diasporas and the nations state: from victims to challengers” (1996), Robin Cohen quotes the *Deuteronomy* and the *Old Testament* to define the notion of diaspora from Jewish religious perspectives. Equally scriptural is “Therefore will the land be out of their reach for forty years: In distraction will they wander through the land” (The Quran 5:26) which is a Quranic verse about the dispersal of the Jews in the 6<sup>th</sup> Century BC.

<sup>54</sup> *Lisan al-Arab* (“ga-ra-ba”).

<sup>55</sup> *Almujam Alwaseet* (“ga-ro-ba”).

dispersal as being forced or self-implemented. However, there is one connotational meaning of *ghourba* that partly governs this experience when it makes reference to the Arab Diaspora. In Arabic etymology the word *ghourba* is also a derivation from the word *ghourab*<sup>56</sup> which is the Arabic word for the raven. This is significant in the sense that for Arab's collective imagination, and although this black bird is sometimes considered sacred, it is also considered to be ominous and its very presence is usually associated with blood-shedding, pessimism, evil, immorality, and separation (Al-Jahez, no date).

### ***Ghourba* in Arabia: From the Pre-Islamic Era (6<sup>th</sup> Century A.D.) to the Present**

*Ghourba* is a nostalgic term with a tangible presence in Arabic poetry be that poetry ancient or modern. Rooted in what the etymological analysis suggests about the connotative meanings of *ghourba* in Arabic, it will be noted that even in the poetic survey below *ghourba* or diaspora is perceived by the different speakers as an essentially painful experience. Interestingly, an early mention of the term *ghourba* can even be found in one of the verses narrated by the prophet Islam Mohammad in which he says: "Islam has been born *ghareeban* (alienated) and will end up *ghareeban* (alienated,) so blessed are *the ghourabaa'a* (the alienated)" (*Maousoat AlHadeeth*). The Prophet's personification of Islam as a man in eternal *ghourba* portrays a melancholy image of this religion that is replete with loneliness and pain. That *ghourba* is often quoted by Arabs as a dull experience could be dictated, unintentionally, by the etymological and the religious connotation of this state of being for Arabs.

Many ancient Arab poets describe their own *ghourba* in their biographical poems in which they deplore their loneliness and estrangement. On his deathbed in Constantinople, his "dwelling place"<sup>57</sup>, the renowned Arab prince and poet Imru al-Qais (520-565) realizes that

---

<sup>56</sup> *Almujam Alwaseet* ("ga-ri-ba" and "go-ra-b").

<sup>57</sup> Proctor (2003).

death outside one's homeland is a miserable voyage to the unknown: "Had I perished in our native sands," cries al-Qais, "I would have hailed Death of a perishing face"<sup>58</sup>. For him, death would have been easier, and he would have been stronger in the face of death, had he to die in his homeland among his own native people:

ألا أبلغ بني حجر بن عمرو      وأبلغ ذلك الحي الحميدا  
باني قد بقيت بقاء نفس      ولم أخلق سلاحا أو حديدا  
ولو أني هلكت بأرض قومي      لقلت الموت حق لا خلودا  
ولكني هلكت بأرض قوم      بعيدا عن دياركم شريدا  
بأرض الشام لانسب قريب      ولا مولى ليسعف أو يجودا

Let the Tribe of Hijr, Sons of Amr in all,  
And that virtuous quarter thereof be told,  
That I survived (till the last breath) a human soul;  
And that never was I created of arms and iron mold.  
Had I perished in our native sands,  
I would have hailed Death of a perishing face;  
But, like a nomad I expire far away from thine lands,  
In Sham where no relative to help or grace.

To show how excruciating, yet how also tediously slowly it is to die in a foreign land or in *ghourba*, al-Qais uses expressions like "perish" and "expire" instead of the neutral and straightforward *die* to denote passing away. Besides, his metaphor in which he compares dying in *ghourba* to the aimless journey of a rootless "nomad" is to emphasize al-Qais' feeling of being disgraced because he dies uprooted. It should be taken into consideration that

---

<sup>58</sup> The lines excerpted from the Arabic poem by Imru al-Qais here are cited in Alkhashroom (1982, p. 50).

Translation credits of these lines go to Dr Ahmad Y. AlGhamdi (2018) of the Department of English, Umm Al Qura University, Saudi Arabia, (e-mail: ayghamdi@uqu.edu.sa).

in his *ghourba*, al-Qais resided in one of the palaces of Constantinople and lived the life of royalty (cited in Alkhashroom, 1982, p.50).

Chieftain Almohalhal AlTaghlubi, another Arab poet of the pre-Islamic era, describes the offence he feels when someone from outside the tribe of AlTaghlubi proposed to his daughter. For AlTaghlubi, had he not been deprived of his homeland and his tribal power, he would have this fiancé's face "drenched in blood"<sup>59</sup>:

جنب و كان الخباء من آدم      أنكحها فقدما الأراقم في  
ضرج ما أنف خاطب بدم      لو بابا نين جاء يخطبها

Away from her tribe, Araquem, my daughter was forced to marry

At Janb tribe, and, alas, bread and fodder were her dowry

Had Ba'baneen asked for her hand,

He would have been drenched in blood

For Shaghra'a, a woman poet of the pre-Islamic era, *ghourba* is doubly painful because it means loss of homeland and the loss of a lover. In fact, for her, losing a lover to *ghourba* is even more heartbreaking. In the following biographical lines, she begs those who travel back to home to "remember" her to her homeland in which she left her lover Yahya:

بلاداً هوى نفسي بها فاذاكرانيا      خليلي إن أصعدتما أو هبطتما  
على سخط لو أشين أن تعذرانيا      ولا تدعا إن لامني ثم لائم

---

<sup>59</sup> The lines excerpted from the Arabic poem by Almohalhal AlTaghlubi here are cited in Alkhashroom (1982, p. 49). Translation credits of these lines go to Dr Hasan S. Ghazala (2018) of the Department of English, Umm Al Qura University, Saudi Arabia, (e-mail: hsg hazala@uqu.edu.sa).

أحاديث من يحي تشيب النواصيا      فقد شف قلبي بعد طول تجلد  
وإن قطعوا في ذاك عمداً لسانيا<sup>60</sup>      سأرعى ليحيى الود ما هبت الصبا

My two intimates, if you pass up and down

By a land where my love lurks, remember me

And if anyone is to blame me for an act of shame,

When in anger, would you excuse me, not blame.

My heart is aching after long sufferance

Yahya's words turn forelocks gray at once.

I will ever love Yahya as long as the east wind blows

Even if they are on purpose to cut my tongue or nose.

She promises Yahya to remain faithful and to remember him even if they “cut” her “tongue or nose”. To have her tongue cut out is not unusual in such pre-Islamic patriarchal and tribal societies. An Arab woman raised according to tribal custom was never expected to be overtly in love let alone reveal her lover's name. Had it not been for the stress of her *ghourba*, we would not even have known who the lover was.

Examples of Arab Diaspora also include Arabs who were expelled from or chose to leave Spain following its re-subjection to Christendom in 1492, as well as the Palestinians who were forced or chose to leave Palestine following the Israeli occupation in 1948.

AlKhalili (2007) believes that it was indeed the Spaniard-Arabs' Diaspora that augmented

---

<sup>60</sup> The lines excerpted from the Arabic poem by Shaghra'a here are cited in Alkhashroom (1982, p. 73).

Translation credits of these lines go to Dr Hasan S. Ghazala (2018) of the Department of English, Umm Al Qura University, Saudi Arabia, (e-mail: hsghazala@uqu.edu.sa).



Arabic *ghourba* or diaspora poetry and enriched the Arabic library. Ibn Khafajah (1058-1138/9), Abu al-Baqa al-Rundi (1204-1285), Abû Hayyân Al Gharnâti (1256-1344), and Lisan ad-Din ibn al-Khatib (1313-1347) are among many others who are known for their diasporic writing about *Alandalus* (i.e. Spain) (Basag, 1994). The following lines by al-Rundi are most often quoted whenever the Spaniard-Arab's Diaspora is remembered by Arabs<sup>61</sup>.

The didactic speaker of the lines warns the readers that change is inevitable, decline is a must, and pleasant days are short-lived:

فلا يُعزُّ بطيب العيش إنسانُ      لكل شيءٍ إذا ما تم نقصانُ  
مَنْ سَرَّهُ زَمَنٌ ساءَتْهُ أزمانُ      هي الأيامُ كما شاهدتها دُولُ  
ولا يدوم على حالٍ لها شان      وهذه الدار لا تُبقي على أحد

Perfect things falls back in shortage

So man should not be deceived by long age.

Days are in an unceasing, everlasting change.

He who is glad today may be sad at a later stage.

In this world, everyone should be one day dead

And every state of affairs never goes on to the end

Images of decay of the lines above give way to brighter and livelier images when the speaker, who is exiled in Ceuta, remembers his homeland cities of Valencia, Murcia, Jativa, and Cordoba and then wonders whether he will be able to return there or whether he is destined to die far away:

---

<sup>61</sup> The lines excerpted from the Arabic poem here are cited in Basag (1994, p. 86). Translation credits of these lines go to Dr Hasan S. Ghazala (2018) of the Department of English, Umm Al Qura University, Saudi Arabia, (e-mail: hsgazala@uqu.edu.sa).

وَأَيْنَ (شَاطِبَةُ) أَمْ أَيْنَ (جَيَّانُ) فَاسْأَلْ (بِلَنْسِيَّةً) مَا شَأْنُ (مُرْسِيَّةً)  
من عالمٍ قد سما فيها له شأنُ وَأَيْنَ (قُرْطُبَةُ) دَارُ الْعُلُومِ فَكَمْ  
ونهرها العذبُ فياضٌ وملآنُ وَأَيْنَ (حُمَصُ) وما تحويه من نزه

Ask Balencia/Valencia city what befell of Murcia, man,  
And the thereabouts of the Andalusian Shatibah and Jayyan.

And where is Cordoba, the City of knowledge,  
And its many scholars of fame once at vintage.  
Where is Hims city and its fascinating parks for visitors?  
Where is its full, flooding fresh and sweet river?

Lisan ad-Din ibn al-Khatib's muwashshah<sup>62</sup> "Jadak Alghaith", which is still remembered and even put to music and sung to date (Shannon, 2015), is in fact a love song inspired by ibn al-Khatib's diasporic experience. This famous muwashshah is about a "homeless" love story of lovers whose Spaniard-Arab's Diaspora resulted in their separation and turned their love story into a dream<sup>63</sup>:

يا زمان الوصل بالأندلس جادك الغيث إذا الغيث همي  
في الكرى أو خلسة المختلس لم يكن وصلك إلا خلماً

Would that every time rain comes down

---

<sup>62</sup> According to *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (2012), muwashshah is one form of Andalusia poetry of the 10<sup>th</sup> Century and is a "distinctive local contribution to Arabic poetry, [and] the only strophic form ever cultivated to any great extent by poets."

<sup>63</sup>The lines excerpted from the Arabic poem here are cited in Basag (1994, pp. 82-83). Translation credits of these lines go to Dr Hasan S. Ghazala (2018) of the Department of English, Umm Al Qura University, Saudi Arabia, (e-mail: hsgazala@uqu.edu.sa).

Water you, time of love and lovers at Andalusia.

Your time was no more than a mere dream

At sleep overnight, or a sneak by a sneaker.

The political trauma that befell the Palestinians following the 1948 Israeli occupation of Palestine and resulting in the dispersal of the Palestinians provides substantial elements for Arabic poetry that deplores the exodus of the Palestinians and meditates their return to their homeland. The poem “We Will Return One Day” which is set to music and sung by the Lebanese diva Fairuz<sup>64</sup> is highly popular and dearly remembered by Arabs (Sami, 2009). Its writer: Haroun H. Rasheed, nicknamed “The Poet of Return”, is in fact a prominent poet of the Palestinian diaspora (Mir, 2013). Another example is the celebrated Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish (1942-2008) who writes poetry of longing for homeland that is universal in its meaning and could be seen as describing the pain of “displaced people everywhere” (Mir, 2013). Darwish’s poem “To My Mother” the text of which appears on the jacket of Nye’s *19 Varieties of Gazelle* (2002) is another example of “the dream of return” in the guise of longing to the speaker’s mother. “If I come back one day,” the speaker begs his mother, “take me as a veil to your eyelashes/ cover my bones with the grass/ Blessed by your footsteps” (Darwish, no date).

The poetry of the renowned poets Badr Shakir al-Sayyab (1926-1964), and Nizar Kabbani’s (1923-1998) contributes to the growth of a plethora of the poetry of diaspora in Arabic. Because of his Marxist views, Shakir al-Sayyab fled his homeland Iraq in 1952 to experience an excruciating *ghourba*. This experience imbues his poetry with gloomy hues to the point that he is commonly known as the poet of sadness and pain (Boullata, 2007). His

---

<sup>64</sup> Fairuz is a “Lebanese diva” who, according to Holly Aylett (1994) “commands fees greater than Barbara Streisand” and who is known in her country as the “Seventh Pillar of Baalbek” (Holly, 2015).

famous poem “A stranger on the Shores of the Gulf”<sup>65</sup> (al-Sayyab, 1960) is a dramatic monologue that cries the speaker’s loss. A moment on the shores of the Gulf captures a “stranger” who suddenly begins to cry “Iraq”. With each tear he drops light fades away and the waves roar and threaten this speaker’s lonely soul. The dramatic monologue reaches a climax when the speaker begins to cry for Iraq so loudly that his voice creates tidal waves that reach up to the sky and drop down again as tears to the sea. “Iraq” is echoed by “the waves”, by “the wind”, by “the sea”, and in “the café”. With each sonorous echo, the speaker is sure that his homeland is gone for him:

و على الرمال ، على الخليج  
جلس الغريب، يسرّح البصر المحير في الخليج  
و يهدّ أعمدة الضياء بما يصعد من نشيج  
أعلى من العباب يهدر رغوّه و من الضجيج  
صوت تفجّر في قرارة نفسي التكلّي : عراق  
كالمذّ يصعد ، كالسحابة ، كالدموع إلى العيون  
الريح تصرخ بي عراق  
و الموج يعول بي عراق ، عراق ، ليس سوى عراق  
البحر أوسع ما يكون و أنت أبعد ما يكون  
و البحر دونك يا عراق  
بالأمس حين مررت بالمقهى ، سمعتك يا عراق

And on the sands of the Gulf,  
Sat a stranger, gazing distractedly in puzzlement at the Gulf  
Demolishing the illumination posts by the noise it re-echoes,  
A noise higher than the torrent stream with gurgling foam

---

<sup>65</sup> Translation credits of the lines from al-Sayyab’s poem go to Dr Hasan S. Ghazala (2018) of the Department of English, Umm Al Qura University, Saudi Arabia, (e-mail: hsgazala@uqu.edu.sa).

A sound that bursts out in the innermost of my bereaved self: Iraq,

Like the flow coming up like a cloud, like tears in the eyes

The wind shouts at me, Iraq

The waves screams at me, Iraq, Iraq, nothing else but Iraq

The poem ends with lamentations following the speaker's realization that none of his cries will reach his homeland and that he will never see Iraq again no matter how long he waits. He is left with destitution and tears, and his homeland to destruction and misery:

واحسرتاه .. فلن أعود إلى العراق

وهل يعود

من كان تعوزه النقود ؟ وكيف تدّخر النقود

و أنت تأكل إذ تجوع ؟ و أنت تنفق ما تجود

به الكرام ، على الطعام ؟

لتبكيّ على العراق

فما لديك سوى الدموع

وسوى انتظارك ، دون جدوى ، للرياح وللقلوع

Alas, I will never go back to Iraq

Will he return

Who has run out of money? How to save money

And you have to eat out of hunger? And you spend

What the generous do on food?

Verily you have to cry for Iraq

For you have nothing but tears

And you're hanging in vain for winds and sails.

Although the list of Arab poets who wrote about their diasporic experience is a long one, I cannot end this concise review without quoting from Nizar Kabbani's (1923-1998) poetry

about *ghourba*. It is well known to Arab readers who are interested in poetry that the exiled Syrian poet Kabbani has always caused controversy because of the political nature of his poetry (Thiab, 2003). His political stance resulted in his exile in London where he died. Kabbani's banned poem entitled "Natives without Home" (Kabbani, 1985) is an uncompromising criticism of manipulative politics that takes advantage of the misery of homeless people who are destined to lead a life of migration and diaspora. "Natives without home" writes Kabbani, are as scared as "[c]hased sparrows" and as ugly and exposed as the "dead without coffins". Those homeless natives, Kabbani adds to stress their dilemma, are degenerate like "whores" and are commodities owned by the strong who can buy and sell them the way it suits him. Kabbani's images of slavery, of decay, and of death continue until we see his homeland "crucified" and "broken," left to the misery of loneliness and injustice. This long poem, which is, like most of Kabbani's poems, highly politicized, emphasizes that these "homeless citizens" are endlessly subjected to lies, abuses and heresy until they die adrift in alien lands (Thiab, 2003):

مواطنون دونما وطن  
مطاردون كالصافير على خرائط الزمن  
مسافرون دون أوراق.. وموتى دونما كفن  
نحن بغايا العصر  
كل حاكم يبيعنا ويقبض الثمن<sup>66</sup>

Natives without home  
Chased like sparrows on the maps of time  
Travelers without papers...dead without coffins  
We are the whores of our age

---

<sup>66</sup> Translation credits of these lines go to Dr Hasan S. Ghazala (2018) of the Department of English, Umm Al Qura University, Saudi Arabia, (e-mail: hsgazala@uqu.edu.sa).

Every ruler sells us and takes the price

### **Diaspora and Survival: Pain and Balm**

The evidence I have used above to show that diaspora is a painful experience does not exclude the fact that this pain can be overcome by the diasporic subjects. This contention is experienced by the Arab American speakers of the poetry of diaspora that this section is going to investigate. In their endeavor to settle down and be part of their “dwelling places”<sup>67</sup>, these speakers also face difficulties, yet they invent strategies or models that help them survive and successfully overcome these difficulties without losing their emotional or literal connections with the land of origin<sup>68</sup> (Ben-Rafael, 2013). These survival strategies function like moderators between a diasporic subject’s affection to, or ties with, the home of origin, and this subject’s affection to, or ties with, the “dwelling place”<sup>69</sup>. They help the dispersed to survive or to deal with the consequences of the diasporic context in which his/her dual identity might be threatened or trivialized. The fact that I label them as ‘survival’ strategies is to stress their role in helping the dispersed to survive; I do not try to judge the extent to which a strategy is successful or not.

In this section, I address the range of survival strategies that are adopted by the speakers of the poetry of diaspora of my four Arab American poets at the center of this study. These strategies are integration, antagonism, withdrawal, and dissociation-association. All of these strategies are used when any speaker is confronted by an overt or a covert racial context

---

<sup>67</sup> Proctor (2003).

<sup>68</sup> In the context of this thesis, the dwelling place / home is the United States, the land of origin/homeland could be Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, or Palestine; the countries from which the poets studied in this thesis and their speakers of the diaspora poetry originate.

<sup>69</sup> Proctor (2003).

in the “dwelling place”<sup>70</sup>. They might also be employed when loneliness is triggered by a memory of homeland. Integration is a survival tool that preserves the ethnic identity of the dispersed person (i.e. the Arab) without hampering adaptation to the culture of the host land (i.e. America). Mohja Kahf’s Arab American speakers are representative of this survival strategy. Antagonism is a survival strategy that is employed by Laila Halaby’s Arab American speakers whose hostility to the culture of the “dwelling place”<sup>71</sup> is stronger than any other positive emotion. Elmaz Abinader’s Arab American speakers survive the diasporic experience through peaceful withdrawal that immunizes them from unwanted racial encounters. Naomi Nye’s speakers swings between two moods of survival; the dissociative in which an Arab American speaker is on the verge of denying her/his ethnic roots or identity, and the associative in which a speaker boasts of these roots and also enjoys his/her current status as an American citizen. The fact that these strategies vary emphasizes that “universalizing ... diasporic experience” cannot be a norm (Pearce, Fowler, and Crawshaw, 2013, p. 48), and that the experience is not “generic,” but is changeable, “multiple and overlapping” (Wald and Williams, 2006, no page) (Koc and Welch, 2001) even among people who belong to the same diasporic group (Pearce, Fowler, and Crawshaw, 2013).

### **Global Racism**

Contextually speaking, racism seems to be the main source of stress in the diasporic experience of the Arab Americans who feature as speakers in the poems studied in this thesis. A clear definition of what racism is remains controversial (Memmi, 1999; Rattansi, 2007), but Memmi’s (1999) understanding of racism as a “destructive relation between individuals” (p. 32) and as “conflict between two modes of membership” (p. 32) in one social context is

---

<sup>70</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> *ibid.*



sufficient to explain the unfair practices against Americans of Arab descent in the United States. With the white majority “at the top” (Memmi, 1999, p. 54) because they dominate the land, the media, and the economy, non-white minority groups in the United States are marginalized socially and culturally. They become vulnerable and easy victims of scapegoating and bullying. In many cases, it is to avoid racial bullying and discrimination that the speakers of the poems herein studied deploy the survival strategies I mentioned in the previous section. It is possible that racism continues to prove itself a potential power that divides and spreads hatred and violence in our global connected world. The fact that “human beings tend to mistrust, stereotype, discriminate against, or hate those belonging to out-groups” (cited in Freeman, 2009, p. 6) seems to also be a valid one. In a book published in 2010, Ian Law analyses racists and racism patterns in the modern world. Anti-minority practices, Law believes, with hostility against the Roma, Muslim, Jew, and Black persist in media and social networks fostering these practices (Law, 2010). The world stage, whether the international or the national, proves Law to be true. The rise of the right-wing parties in countries like Austria, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland and Hungary, emphasizes that even when these parties do not win an election, they still make electoral gains (Aisch, Pearce, and Rousseau, 2017). Racist practices are also documented in Japan against the deprived Burakumins, in China against the black Chinese, and in Sinui Island in South Korea against the poor Pekuchon, to mention but a few examples (Law, 2010).

That “a large number of people in American society are unalterably racist” (Salaita, 2006, p. 32) indicates that racism and ethnic discrimination are inherent within the United States (Kuykendall, 2005). Although the practice of legitimizing racist behaviors based on our biological differences is nowadays deemed uncivilized, and an article like Arthur de Gobineau’s “An Essay on the Inequality of Human Races” (1853) with its emphasis on the supremacy of the white race is considered outdated, contemporary practices against the

minorities in the United States recall to memory a form of scientific racism.<sup>72</sup> It is only in the year 2013, following violent actions that were “inflicted on Black communities by the state and vigilantes”, that a global network, *Black Lives Matter*, was established in the United States to campaign against the biased, sometimes institutionally racist, treatment of African Americans in the USA and around the world (*Black Lives Matter*, 2013, no page). Furthermore, an enthusiastic political debate about “a new post-racial world” following the election of Barack Obama (Law, 2010, p. 218), has not come to fruition since the rise of Donald Trump who promotes nationalism, but not international globalism, as his and his country’s credo<sup>73</sup>.

Although documented materials and statistical data are less visible there than they are in the West, it is possible to write about racist practices and hostility toward minorities and the different ‘other’ in the Arab world. It may sound anachronous, but slavery is still practiced in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with an Arab country, the ethnically diverse Mauritania,<sup>74</sup> as the last existing stronghold of this abominable practice. According to Amnesty International 2016 / 2017 report, “slavery” and “systematic discrimination” continue in this Arab country “making up two thirds of the population.” Additionally, in an area that is keen at keeping its homogenous societies intact, the Arab world frowns at its own minorities and is consequently draining its societies of diversity. In the Arab world, the number of “Jewish minorities [...] and the number of Christian Arabs is dwindling either due to voluntary or forced migration”

---

<sup>72</sup> de Gobineau’s article is believed to be the starting point of using biological findings to justify privileging “classes from a scientific point of view” (Swanton, 1916, p. 430; Memmi, 1999; Rattansi, 2003).

<sup>73</sup> “Americanism, not globalism, will be our credo”, a Donald Trump motto, is central to his electoral campaign in 2016 (cited in Solomon, 2016, p. 509).

<sup>74</sup> Two “race categories... and their sub-ethnic groups: the Moors (whites and black) and the black Africans (Pulhars, Soninkes, and Wolof)” exist in Mauritania (Hamed *et al.*, 2012, p. 151; Jourde, 2001).

(Al Qassemi, 2016). Unlike the West that has laws that transform “outsiders into citizens” (Meijer and Butenschon, 2017, p. 13), Arab countries’ naturalization laws, if present at all, are so complicated that they turn naturalization into an impossible process regardless of one’s achievement in an Arab country or the duration of one’s stay (Al Qassemi, 2016). Furthermore, in most Arab countries, a mother cannot confer her nationality onto her children if she is married to a foreign man (UNHCR, 2017, no page). The non-citizen, *bidun* of Kuwait is an extreme case of the Arab world’s non-inclusive nature. This group who is denied Kuwaiti citizenship due to a “bureaucratic mistake in the 1960s” (Meijer and Butenschon, 2017, p. 31), is seen as a threat to the homogeneity of the society in spite of the *bidun*’s tribal Arabic roots and their kinship with the Kuwaiti people. “Sectarianism, suspicion and distrust, fear, and xenophobia are attributes that are common to [the Arab] society that doesn’t accept the other” (Al Qassemi, 2016).

### **Racism Against Arab Americans**

Having shown patterns of racism in the West and in the Arab world, it is appropriate for this study to further discuss existing racism against Arabs in America bearing in mind that Arab American poetry studied here is a division of the poetry of minorities in the United States. While it is understandable that a tragic event like 9/11 would cause rage and bias against Arabs and Muslims in America and lead to the whole world believing all hijackers to be Muslim-Arab, evidence of bias against Arab and Arab American can be found in practices prior to 9/11. Gualtieri (2009) and Haddad (2001; 2004), for example, rightly discuss how Arab Americans fought to be a recognizable race in the exclusive United States. In many cases, they also needed to fight the prejudice of American entertainment media and even academic opinion. According to Gualtieri (2009), removing “hobo, tramp and vagrant” as synonyms for the word Arab from “Roget’s *Thesaurus*” (p. 8) was not an easy mission for Arab Americans. However, with Hollywood’s film industry, this mission has proved futile

(Gualtieri, 2009; Shaheen, 2009). In fact, Hollywood's inferiorization of Arabs and its "insidious images of Arabs in its movies" is a tendency of this cinema giant (Gualtieri, 2009, p. 9; Katoti, 2012; Shaheen, 2009; Hartman, 2006; Salaita, 2006). In the updated version of his book *Reel Bad Arabs* (2009), Shaheen reviews 1100 movies, most of them Hollywood's productions, and writes:

The primary difference between this updated 2009 edition and the 2001 book is this: this edition contains analyses of an additional 125 pre-9/11 movies. That brings the total number of films covered in this book to nearly 1100. Contrary to what some people think, prior to September 11, 2001, Hollywood has already released nearly 1100 movies with Arab characters or images in them, the vast majority demeaning. Of the additional films, a few are Dutch, French, and Japanese. But they are just as grotesque as all other pre-9/11 films. All 1100 movies clearly demonstrate the Arab stereotype were contaminating minds long before 9/11. (p. 2)<sup>75</sup>

Certain Islamic symbols like the beard or the Muslim woman's veil or head-cover continues to be the center of attention in such racist perceptions, thanks to Hollywood and the media. That the head-covering of a woman of Arab descent is part of a barbarous tradition, that it is oppressive to the woman, and that it turns wearers into weak brainless creatures are not uncommon descriptions of the veil and the woman who wears it (Darraj, 2002; Elia, 2006). These older racist attitudes facilitated reactions of extreme hatred following the 9/11 attacks. Some mosques and churches in the USA were burned in the aftermath of 9/11. Additionally, and in the same dawn, many Arab Americans, including Christians, were harassed with

---

<sup>75</sup> Among the movies Shaheen (2009) reviews in his book are *The Sheik* (1921), *The Mummy* (1932), *Cairo* (1942), *The Steel Lady* (1953), *The Black Stallion* (1979), *The Delta Force* (1986), *Rules of Engagement* (2000), and *Bar Hopping* (2001). In these movies, according to Shaheen (2009), Arabs are portrayed as bestial, extremists, abusive womanizers, and uncivilized.

insults like “damn you Arab. Go back home and leave us alone” (cited in Hendricks *et.al.* 2007, p. 105). For an American senator to compare “Iraqi women” to “catfish” (cited in Hatem, 2005, p. 1), and for this insensitive comparison to provoke laughter, can only be evidence of the silent acceptance of racist behavior as long as the intended target is an Arab. Of course, these enduring racist practices ridicule Arab Americans and ascribe to them an undesirable social status that tends “to be permanent irrespective of the individual’s own conduct” (Kuykendall, 2005, p. 10).

An analysis of the cover-pages of the collections considered in this thesis offers an example of how some USA publishing houses employ a cheap marketing strategy, in which they use stock images to promote the already existing negative stereotypes about Arabs when publishing a book by Arab Americans or when a book has a title reminiscent of Arabs or the Arab world (Davis, Zine, and Taylor, 2007). These images usually evoke barely civilized Arabs for whom lifestyle slaves, odalisques, and talismans are essential.

It is far from being a coincidence that almost all the collections I am studying in this thesis are tinted with these inferiorizing suggestions about Arabs. To begin with, the cover of *E-Mails from Scheherazad* (2003)<sup>76</sup> displays a crowd of turbaned slaves, children in traditional costumes, priests, palm trees, and a billboard with randomly written advertisements. Additionally, on the cover of *My Name on His Tongue* (2012)<sup>77</sup> is a huge odalisque wearing bizarre makeup and posing in a strange way revealing both her palm and the bottom of her strangely shaped foot. Henna is used to create strange shapes on the odalisque’s now colorful palm. To add more peculiarity to the scene, a talisman, the Hand of Fatima, or the Hamsa, is added to this cover. Furthermore, the cover of *In the Country of My*

---

<sup>76</sup> See Appendix 1 (p. 295).

<sup>77</sup> See Appendix 2 (p. 296).

*Dreams* (1999)<sup>78</sup> is plastered with stereotypes about Arabs. On this cover is a photo of nomad Arab girls who look unkempt and deprived. All girls, with their veiled mother, are sitting on a sand hill. Unexpectedly and meaninglessly enough, on the same book-cover, the wheels of a car spring from nowhere and pose behind the mother and her daughters. Needless to say, while this collection of Abinader makes not a single reference to the nomadic life in the Arab region, the photo on its cover-page recycles a negative image of the uncivilized Arabs.

Another veiled and desperate woman appears to be praying on the cover of *This House, My Bones* (2014).<sup>79</sup> Random Arabic calligraphy with a Quranic verse that has nothing to do with the content of the book also appears on the cover. A Latina woman also appears on the cover leaving the reader to wonder what this woman is doing in a collection of poetry about Arabs. These disjointed graphic elements reinforce Western perception of Arabs as odd people. A veiled Arab girl holding a stone with Arabic inscriptions appears on the cover-page of Nye's *19 Varieties of Gazelle* (2002).<sup>80</sup> There on this cover is depicted a Bedouin father wearing the traditional head cover and gown and posing as desperately as can be with the little girl. Both the father and his daughter look weak, desperate, and hopeless. Such designs create an unlively aura as well as reinforcing American media's view of Arabs and Arab Americans as suspicious people (Kulczycki and Lobo, 2001; Salaita, 2006). However, one positive thing about these durable stereotypes is that they bring Arab Americans together (Haddad, 2004) and create "diversity among Americans of Arab descent" in their diasporic experience (Wald, 2009, p. 1307).

Notwithstanding an Arab heritage that immerses *ghourba* with pain, and in spite of widespread patterns of racism, the Arab Americans speakers of the diaspora poetry I will

---

<sup>78</sup> See Appendix 3 (p. 297).

<sup>79</sup> See Appendix 4 (p. 298).

<sup>80</sup> See Appendices 5 and 6 (pp. 399-300)

consider in depth in the following parts of this chapter interact with and counteract their American “dwelling place”<sup>81</sup> to reach self-integration and avoid stress and instability. Deploying survival strategies that help them overcome discrimination, these speakers evolve in their “dwelling place”<sup>82</sup> and their homeland nostalgia, whether it is healthy or painful, and go on to enrich their existence and prove Arab Americans to be a diverse minority with an experience that is ripe for analysis.

### **Diaspora is for Triumph: Integration as a Survival Model**

Mohja Kahf’s Arab American speaker is ever challenging and tolerant. Despite the fact that like the rest of speakers at the center of this study, this speaker also belongs to the Arab American minority, yet her/his adaptation to life outside homeland is drastically different. Mohja Kahf’s speaker is not less aware of the pain a diasporic experience entails, neither is her speaker ignorant of the inferior stereotypes Arab American are subjected to in their “dwelling place”<sup>83</sup>; yet this speaker chooses not to be victimized or to pathetically play the card of ethnicity. This speaker addresses the stereotypes, confronts and mocks them, and in many cases, turns the table against racism and racists. The speaker's challenging spirit enables her/him to integrate and to embrace both identities, the Arab and the American. Identity ambivalence is scarcely present in the diaspora poetry of Mohja Kahf, and even if it has been present in some poems, it does not last for long. Her Arab American speaker is quick to restrain her/himself. S/He does not experience a tragic liminal state<sup>84</sup> and instead of

---

<sup>81</sup> Proctor (2003).

<sup>82</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> According to Stenner (2018), liminal “experiences are experiences that happen during occasions of significant transitions, passages or disruption”. It should be stated here that the term liminality was first used by Arnold van Gennep (1873-1957) (Stenner, 2018; Neumann, 2012).

falling victim to the situation, she/he finds it intriguing and a chance to call for cultural coexistence and hybridity. That is why Kahf's speaker is capable of moving on in the new culture without being disloyal to her native culture.

"Lateefa" by Kahf is an example of the ultimate expression of cultural integration. The poem is set in a multiracial joyous and carefree wedding party in the United States. At this wedding, the Arab American father, for some reason, talks to his busy daughter about the Palestinian issue, a priority issue for Arabs, but the daughter is not ready to listen. She is exalted with joy:

*Daddy, you can talk to me  
all you want about Palestine  
And I'll be faithful to the end  
but I don't know it, never*  
[...]

I know New Jersey. I've run  
my fingers up and down its spine,  
scaled the vertebrae of official buildings  
on Broad Street, in Newark ("Lateefa")

As an Arab, the speaker in "Lateefa" admits that when it comes to Palestine, she will "be faithful to the end". But in the middle of a joyous wedding party in America, she does not want her mood to be disrupted by homeland politics especially the politics of Palestine. Her "*I don't know it, never,*" meaning Palestine, may constitute denial of a land and an issue which is fed to every Arab the moment s/he is born. But that is not the case. This girl tries to maintain her balance by displaying a sort of a non-parochial attitude. Her heart remembers her native people, yet those people should understand that she has grown up in New Jersey and is able to nurture an intimate relationship with her acquired home, America. Through a



series of sensual images, she shows her father, and the reader, that her relationship with America is both emotional and physical. In caressing America's "spine" and "vertebrae", and in turning the Muslims' sacred month of Ramadan into a New Jersey hip-hop dancer that "slings [Muslims] all across that hip/ that hip thrust out", Kahf's speaker indulges herself in love for America and love for her Arab culture and is able to combine and reconcile the two. Furthermore, in an utmost sense of integration, she reminds her father, and the reader, that here in America everyone can live and merge:

If we love what we are we can make it  
Survive here: George Washington, meet  
Harun al-Rashid [...]  
Already, here's Abigail Abdullah,  
Pilgrim-to-Makkah's Progress to Jersey City ("Lateefa")

This speaker is so deeply immersed in multi-ethnic American culture that the issue of Palestine, central as it is to Arab consciousness, is of less interest to a young Arab American girl more willing to embrace her multi-ethnic American reality than regret a land she has never seen. To her, an historic Arab figure such as Harun al-Rashid is no more important than George Washington, and a pilgrimage to New Jersey is as sacred as the Muslim pilgrimage to Makkah.

Her integrative sense is her survival model. Her life outside her home of origin is also a life and her American home is an extension or a variation of what home is. By doing this, she saves herself from the anger otherwise experienced, for example, by Halaby's speaker below. Additionally, her integrative sense helps her transcend barriers and boundaries successfully. In adjusting her "immigrant way" ("Fayetteville as in Fate", Kahf, 2003, pp. 6-

7)<sup>85</sup> to suit the “American way” (“Fate”) she shields herself against the pain Halaby’s speaker feels. She accepts that America is a fate she is destined to live:

When I moved to Fayetteville, Arkansas  
I soon learned to say it Fay’tteville, as in fate  
I came into the town the American way,  
the immigrant way, the upwardly mobile  
bedouin trekking across the highway (“Fate”)

Accepting that move as a “fate” and welcoming it as an “upward” move emphasizes the speaker’s wishes to assimilate herself into the American culture without denying her original Arab or “bedouin” self. The speaker here sounds like the progressive Scheherazad of this collection, who seizes the American diasporic chance, and the new millennium, to turn the whole experience into a positive one. Scheherazad becomes an independent novelist, as the discussion will show later, and like her, the speaker of this poem is eager to move upward aware that America has it all for an “immigrant”. In fact, the speaker’s reference to this better fate of the “upwardly mobile/ bedouin” is a reflection of a reality and is not a mere emotional reaction. That is because in their “dwelling place”<sup>86</sup> America, the land of opportunity, many dispersed Arabs have a chance to move themselves upward whether financially or socially. There, Arab Americans in particular, according to Haddad (2004) are among the most successful minority groups with high education and decent incomes and the speaker could be alluding to just that. Amidst her enthusiasm, she moves on and teaches herself the art of assimilation embracing multiculturalism instead of deploring her diasporic state. Her sense of optimism and her integrative behaviors enable her to see two cultures, the Arab and the American, often perceived as antithetical to each other, coexisting in harmony and

---

<sup>85</sup> Hereafter “Fate”.

<sup>86</sup> Proctor (2003).

enthusiasm. For her, the “bedouin”, the quintessential Arab of the desert, has an American counterpart. If, this speaker says, an Arab “bedouin” picks “the wild herbs, the *khibbeze*,” and “wears a *sirwal*,” his American counterpart “pick[s] ‘poke’” and “wears overalls” (“Fate”). If one says “*Amen*” the other also prays and says “أمين” (“Fate”). In shifting her diasporic lenses towards “human common ties rather than differences” (El Said, 2003, p. 203), be these ties trivial or not, she is avoiding the cultural clashes that can be expected in multiracial societies. This optimistic speaker tries to explain that, in spite of their dissimilarities, “[t]heir names and their languages are widely different/ and they believe improbable, vile things about each other,” (“Fate”), there is a chance that these culturally heterogeneous people, the Arabs and the Americans, will one day “recognize each other,” “e-mail one another,” and “learn each other’s tongue and put words into each other’s mouth” (“Fate”). For this to happen, one should accept differences and try to resolve them. Her linguistic playfulness in which vernacular Arabic words such as “*khibbeze*” and “*sirwal*” are used along with the Arabic “أمين”, flow with their English counterparts “wild herb”, “overall”, and “Amen” is an example of resolving differences via language. Both languages speak about the same thing with different tongues. The use of the intimate vernacular is meant to add intimacy and warmth to the scene. Unless the speaker feels at home, she would not have used her vernacular Arabic. Additionally, her collective references, “their”, “are”, “they”, “each other”, and “one another” help demolish more cultural barriers that may place one of the two cultures, the Arab or the American, in a better or a lower place than the other. Both are equally guilty of mistrusting each other, but both have the chance to embrace each other; togetherness, however, is the key-factor for this to happen. Certainly, what Kahf’s enthusiastic speaker demonstrates can hardly be labeled as a form of cultural obedience. That is because she does not subdue her Arab self to satisfy an American norm or an American self. Neither does she scarify an American self to heal an Arab pain. Hers is an awareness and an understanding of the non-

parochial citizen of the world who tries to maintain a balance that is not easy to maintain in multiracial societies and especially when one belongs to a minority group that is deluged with stereotypes.

In the series of poems entitled “*Hijab Scene*” (p. 25; p. 31; p. 39; p. 41; p. 42) in *E-mails from Scheherazad* (Kahf, 2003), however, this balance is jeopardized when the Arab American speaker is bullied because she looks like a strange foreigner with her head covering on. But her integrative model of survival helps her resist being intimidated and enables her to assert herself: “I’m already American” and “I speak English” (“*Hijab Scene #7*”). This same speaker looks her American intimidator in the eye and loudly refutes existing stereotypes about women in the hijab which haunt the onlooker’s mind:

No, I’m not bald under the scarf

[...]

No, I would not like to defect

I’m already American

[...]

What else do you need to know

relevant to my buying insurance,

opening a bank account,

reserving a seat on a flight? (“*Hijab Scene #7*”)

Where the head-scarf is not a norm, wearers of this Muslim hijab may in many cases be the subject of disapproving looks. That is because the hijab has always been unfairly regarded as symbolic of both Muslim women’s oppression and perceived Islamic backwardness, and in some other cases, it is labeled as a threat that risks safety (Ramachandran, 2009).

Commenting on what she called “the hijab controversy” within feminist groups in liberal Canada, Chew (2009) writes:

A Muslim woman wearing hijab embodies a challenge to this historically and racially constructed secularism. It is presumed she is oppressed by patriarchal religious authorities. There is no consideration of her agency, resistance, or choice. Instead, opposition to her is framed as an opposition to an avowal of religion in public space, and as such, cannot be accepted or tolerated. (p. 87)

In many cases, Western feminism in the twenty first century seems to fail Arab women who choose to embrace their traditional culture and put on the head-cover. Hatem (2005), Elia (2006), and Vilarrubias, (2011) agree that there is still a tendency to assert Western authority over Arab American women, an authority that tells these minority women what is right and what is wrong, as if they are weak and unable of independent and rational choices. A celebrated feminist like Susan Moller Okin, is criticized by Liz Fekete (2006) for failure to accept multiculturalism, and hence the varying cultural differences with regard to women's issues, as enriching to the feminist quest rather than "a threat to the fragile gains made by western liberal feminists" (p. 12). When, for example, a Western feminist asks Muslim women to uncover their heads because she understands the hijab as an inferior symbol of Islamic oppression and one that weakens its wearer, this feminist is not only being ignorant, but is also oppressive to a woman whose hijab might be a very personal and an independent choice (Katoti, 2012) as well as a symbol of Islamic pride. So, assumptions about a Muslim woman being "bald under the scarf" ("*Hijab* Scene #7"), and unable to perform simple routines such as "buying insurance," ("*Hijab* Scene #7") or "opening bank accounts" ("*Hijab* Scene #7"), are grounded in the culture of the American speaker, a culture that denigrates the hijab. However, Kahf's progressive speaker, who knows how to turn the negative encounter into a positive one, refuses to succumb and resorts to her skillful repartee:

Yes, I speak English

Yes, I carry explosives

They're called words

And if you don't get up

Off your assumptions,

They're going to blow you away ("*Hijab Scene #7*")

Her metaphorical image "I carry explosives/ They're called words" is a multi-functional mock-threat; it compares the power of words to the power of explosives and at the same time creates a sense of humor that mitigates a potentially catastrophic situation caused by the racial context. It also disrupts the development of the racial scene and brings it to a calm climax where words abase potential physical threats. Smartly, she turns the table of America's prejudice against itself and uses this same prejudice, or racist "assumption", as subject matter to her words, or her future writing about this racial encounter. In a country that is proud of its multiculturalism, when the speaker decides to expose the details of the above racist scene, she is sure to demolish, or to "blow away" America's image as a country that respects diversity. Her self-asserting reaction and her strong diction "explosives", "get up", "blow you away" pull her out of this context of racial bullying and enable her to move on.

Similarly, in "*Hijab Scene #3*" (Kahf, 2003, p. 25)<sup>87</sup> we have an Arab American mother who refuses to be intimidated because of her head-cover and is strong enough not to be victimized. Like any American mother, she is interested in joining an American PTA. In spite of her interest, she is not taken seriously or even acknowledged by Jim the secretary because she wears a hijab and does not look like a "regular American mother" ("*Hijab Scene #3*"). Jim's attitude is not unexpected; he is simply being loyal to the stereotypes about the empty-headed women in hijabs. For him, she cannot be American enough with this hijab on and an American PTA is not a place for a veiled woman. But as is the case with Kahf's

---

<sup>87</sup> Hereafter "*Hijab Scene #3*".

integrative and progressive speakers, this bullied mother reacts in a humorous way to contain her angry self. When apprehensive Jim asks her again if she really wants to be part of the PTA, this mother's humor-clad anger takes over the situation: "Dammit, Jim," (*Hijab Scene #3*) this mother replies, "I'm a Muslim woman, not a Klingon!" (*Hijab Scene #3*). And to the very astonishment of Jim, the veiled mother's Americanized self emerges fully to the surface:

"I would, I would," I sent up flares,  
Beat on drums, waved navy flags,  
Tried smoke signals, American Sign Language,  
Morse code, Western Union, telex, fax (*Hijab Scene #3*)

That she feels insulted is obvious despite this mother's sense of humor. The "flares," and "smoke," the beating of "drums" and the waving of "flags" (*Hijab Scene #3*) are expressions of anger elicited by Jim's racist attitude. Her reference to American communication symbols like "American Sign Language/ Morse code/ Western Union" and other means like the "telex" and the "fax" is made to both expose in front of Jim her learned American-self, and to hint to the failure of language, or of languages, to connect people when a racist attitude dominates the scene. However, this speaker does not choose to dwell on the plight of racism for much longer and soon brings this climactic scene into the peaceful resolution of coexistence: "Can we save the ship we're both on?" (*Hijab Scene #3*). She clearly shows Jim and the reader that under her covered-head is a transcendental woman who is as much American as Jim but who is culturally superior to him and to the whole racial context.

Whether the poems are biographical or not, they emphasize hijab as a symbol of identity, or in fact the "most visible symbol of female Muslim identity," (EUMC, 2006) and regard wearing it as an expression of that identity but not necessarily as a religious practice.

Kahf's dispersed speaker is constantly capable of recapturing the essence of cultural integration and is quick to blow away the ashes of jaundiced racial contexts to resurrect herself as strongly as can be. She understands that multiculturalism might be antagonized by racist behaviors, but she also believes that in America, her dwelling home, there is a place for everyone. Her strong sense of affirmation and self-assertion enable this speaker to overcome difficulties and see possible fruitful chances. She chooses to survive, for generations to come, and to "intermarry and commingle/ And multiply" beyond any racial context:

We will intermarry and commingle

And multiply, oh, how we'll multiply

Muhammad-lovers in the motley

Miscellany of the land ("Move Over", Kahf, 2003, p. 40)<sup>88</sup>

For better survival in America, the speaker calls for interracial marriage and resorts to what the first wave of Arab American practised in the early twentieth century when many married American women wanted to feel more Americanized (Haddad, 2004) hoping to secure themselves a better status in the society. The younger speaker here, however, gives interracial marriage a wider interpretation. It is not only to feel part of the non-Muslim white ethnicity that makes the majority of the USA, but also to let the blood of Muslims, or "Muhammad-lovers" circulate in the veins of this miscellaneous land until one day Muslims become *de facto* components of America that pass unquestioned. The optimism of this image is conveyed through the suggestion of marriage and its associated joy, and also through the auditory structure of the lines where the repetition of sounds in this festive context turn them into an Eastern ululation that befits the prospect of a happy ending.

---

<sup>88</sup> Hereafter "More Over".



### **Diaspora is Pain: Antagonism as a Survival Model**

In contrast to Kahf's speaker whose sense of humor and overall optimism helps her overcome the unwanted consequences of racial contexts, Halaby's speaker's anger and aggression are distinct features of her voice in the diaspora poetry analyzed here. Halaby's suffers from what I label as identity ambivalence. She is American yet is unable to accommodate herself to life in United States and enters into what could be called a prolonged state of liminality. In fact, Halaby's speaker antagonizes her American "dwelling place"<sup>89</sup> while yearning for a homeland to which she, paradoxically, does not return. Antagonism becomes this speaker's model of survival and one that enables her to continue living in a land she does not feel a part of. What Halaby's speaker does here is typical of a description given by Gilroy (2002) to those Africans in their diaspora who sing for their homeland and wish to return to it without attempting to return to it in reality. Like many others, Gilroy states "transplanted people lose their desire to return" to their homeland even if they romanticize this return (p. 208).

In the poem "Journey", the speaker is tortured by the fact that she holds American nationality and considers being American a sin that needs atoning for. Burning the American part in her into ashes, and then tossing the ashes into the water of the motherland are soothing acts. After atonement, full burial of the speaker's American part in the sands of the motherland would let her feel clean. For these to happen, however, there should be a return to the ancient sites of the speaker's point of origin, Jordan:

I cremated my Americanness  
flung it from the top of the castle in Ajlun  
tossed it into the Dead Sea  
drowned it off a boat in Aqaba  
buried it near the ruins in Um Qais ("journey")

---

<sup>89</sup> Proctor (2003).

“Ajlun”, the “Dead Sea”, “Aqaba”, and “Um Qais”, all in Jordan, function here as purgatories. It is there that the speaker wishes to purify her hyphenated identity from that part of it called “American”. Aggression against, and hatred towards, her American identity is also highlighted by means of strong verbs like “cremate”, “fling”, “draw”, “toss”, “drown” and “bury”. In the actions denoted by these verbs, the speaker’s American identity is annihilated. Only the Arab remains.

There is indeed something masochistic in these images where one wishes to atone for a sin through self-torturing. The disturbance this speaker feels is present in almost all diaspora poetry in Halaby’s *My Name on His Tongue* (Halaby, 2012). A post-9/11 collection of poetry, at the peak of the Arabs’ stigmatization (Mason and Matella, 2014), *My Names on His Tongue* has many examples of a “negative encounter with a dominant culture,” in this context the American culture (Wald and Williams, 2006, no page). Such a context “stimulate[s] heightened ethnic consciousness among minorities [,]” (Wald and Williams, 2006, no page) and creates “an exogenous reduction in the expected payoff to acculturation” (Mason and Matella, 2014, p. 2). This speaker’s extreme masochistic behavior towards the American part in her hyphenated identity could be a reaction to the stigmatization experienced in America by the Arab part of that same identity. It highlights the extent to which this speaker suffers from implicit cultural chauvinism.

In fact, Halaby’s speaker’s antagonistic behavior which helps her survive a diasporic pain is not without its consequences. Antagonism seems to swallow the speaker’s own self; she is adrift, unable to define who she is, not even after she is purified of her “Americanness” in her Arab purgatory: “[B]eing/ published,” says the same speaker at the end of the poem, “did not make me a writer/ eating zaatar/ did not make me an Arab/ getting married and having children/ did not make me a woman” (“journey”). Even though she is purified of her sinful “Americanness”, for she tells the reader that she “spat all America out/ like a giant wad

of chewing tobacco” (“journey”), she is still unable to embrace any faith in herself, neither as writer, nor as a woman, and more importantly, not even as an Arab. She is constantly losing her identity track probably because the emotional pressure she is under is beyond her ability to contain or control. The aggressive, almost graphic image of a giant spitting out America is both disgusting and redolent of a speaker who has cultivated anger until it consumes the speaker, hence this speaker’s failure to be anything else if not American. Her failure to interact with, or to adjust herself to, her milieu, creates this Arab American speaker’s identity crisis and leaves her without status. Her antagonistic behaviors may serve to temporarily heal, or to allow her to avoid, cultural injuries such as racism. However, hostility to a society one is destined to live in and chooses not to leave would, at least, create an identity crisis similar to Halaby’s Arab American speaker mentioned above who fails to claim any of the identities she wants for herself.

The aggressive reaction of Halaby’s Arab American speakers seems to be their unifying feature. Where people brag about being able to speak English, the speaker below “spit[s] [...] in English” what she has learned about great English classics:

my grandfather could not read

I devour them in his honor

spit them back in English

in his memory (“grandfathers”, Halaby, 2012, pp. 18-19)<sup>90</sup>

There is something innocent and warm gone from this familial scene of a grandparent, a granddaughter, and the chats over books and reading. Innocence and warmth are gone with the “spit” of the speaker. To “spit” is to be disrespectful, and to spit back in a language it to express both anger and disrespect towards that language. To want to “spit” back the classics

---

<sup>90</sup> Hereafter “grandfathers”.

to honor the memory of her grandfather dishonors both the classics and that dear memory, it also exposes the wrathful nature of the speaker. Noticeably, her anger here stems again from her American identity but is directed this time towards the language it speaks. If in Halaby's "journey" a speaker cremates her Americanness, and "spat all America out/ like a giant wad of chewing tobacco", in the poem "grandfathers", a speaker transforms the act of "speaking" in English into the antagonizing, almost offensive, act of "spitting" out English.

While I find the reaction of Halaby's speakers extreme in their disapproval of America and "Americanness" ("journey"), I still can read them as a possible pay-off to the racial contexts, and a reaction to the increasing "stigmatization" of Arabs in America after the 9/11 attacks, to which the speakers may have been subjected without being able to speak about it. Law (2010) speaks about an "overwhelming" feeling some English language speakers experience when "migrant groups" in America speak English in what the Americans think is an "undermining" and "disrupt"-ing way (p. 203). This could explain the speaker's outraged reactions against English language, and against white people who speak this language (as is the case in the poem "home" below), and her eventual strong desire to return to the idealized tongue of her home of origin; Arabic, which she cannot neither speak nor understand. That is why when her grandfather speaks about Arabic classics she is quick to fantasize about them and to also "spit" the American classics out:

He speaks of the classics:

Hussein, Mahfouz, Idris [...]

*They are the greats*

*One day you will read them*

He speaks of philosophy

Whose words I cannot understand

I daydream ("grandfathers")

There is a considerable difference between the aggressive tone denoted by the wish to “devour” and “spit” English classics, and the passion in “daydream”-ing about Arabic “philosophy”. The previously angry speaker is now the assertive one, sure that Arabic writers “are the greats” and that even though she “cannot understand” them, she will “read them”. Lauri Hoko (1995) speaks about this strong desire to return to the language of the forefathers especially when one cannot speak that language. She states that those returnees exhibit stronger attachment to the language of the forefathers than those who speak it as a mother tongue. To evoke the memory of her cherished place of origin, the Arab American granddaughter above “daydream[s]” about Arabic philosophy and literature, and muses about the Arab novelists “Hussein, Mahfouz, [and] Idris”.

Childhood memories have an impact on us, and whether our memory holds them as negative or positive experiences they remain while we grow up. Struck by these memories, we may secretly, or openly, entertain or disdain them, but to forget them is an unlikely scenario. Exposure to racism at this critical stage of a person’s life has a negative impact on a child’s future health, “anxiety, depression, and self-harm [...] suicidality” and other “mental illnesses” (Priest *et al.*, 2016, p. 1882) are documented risks of discrimination. A study on maternal and children health (Nuru-Jeter *et al.*, 2009) found out that African-American mothers who were exposed to racism during their childhood gave birth to less healthy children. A study (Dulin-Kieta *et al.*, 2011) on children and their awareness of race states that non-white children in America identify their racial identity at an older age than do the white children. This, according to the study, may reflect “an awareness of the value attached to whiteness” (p. 663). This same study also quotes another field study where Asian children in London “downplayed their own [...] identities in favor of whiteness” (Connolly 2002 as cited in Dulin-Kieta *et al.*, 2011). Accordingly, to say that children are aware of race and of racist practices that favor one ethnicity over another is no exaggeration. Certainly, exposure to such

practices has an impact on a child's self-esteem and his/her reaction to the world this child lives in and interacts with. The speaker of the poem "home" (Halaby, 2012, pp. 23-25)<sup>91</sup> seems to have fallen victim to racial bullying which can explain the aggressive reaction she resorts to at a later stage. In this poem, she does not only wish to "spit" in her white classmates' "wet pink mouths", but to also "peel" her skin, and to "erase" whiteness from around her to "build" a "new house" for herself. These wishes are triggered when she is asked "*where-are-you-from?*" ("home")

I pretended  
those children  
with chisels  
in their powdery hands  
and spit in their wet pink mouth  
didn't mean to hurt me  
as they questioned  
my name  
my face  
my place of birth  
my father's absence  
later  
when I stared  
in the mirror  
examined my skin  
peeled it back

---

<sup>91</sup> Hereafter "home".

peeked through  
at tissue and veins  
and blood  
saw who  
I really was (“home”)

As a child she realizes that the question is more about her strange colored-look than anything else, her classmates realize this as well. But as if to deny it, she tries to “pretend” that the case is not what she thinks. There is in the scene above a tension that springs from the paradox between the curiosity of children and the speaker’s mature realization of the racial content of the question. The soft images of “powdery hands” and the “wet pink mouth” convey both the innocence of the little white girls and an anger, that of the speaker, which is heavy with meaning. The speaker’s gradual wish to “peel” her skin and to “peek through/ at tissues and veins” feels inquisitive in nature and in manner. She wants to know who she is but the only way to know that is through a self-torturing act: she needs to “peel” her skin and penetrate her body to discover her true identity. A masochistic wish at an early age serves to stress the findings of the studies quoted above<sup>92</sup> that a child acquires awareness of race at an early stage and that exposure to racial bullying is a lifelong stressor which is born following the discriminatory event. The poem, however, ends with the same speaker thinking through the situation retrospectively in a more peaceful, though also a submissive, manner. For her, now that her storm has abated, “mixed blood” is “an old trailer/ that’s always frowned at/ because no matter where/ it’s parked/ it’s always/ out of place” (“home”). Being non-white in America continues to be a stigma to “frown” at. People of color continue to exist, but their existence is a burden like the burden an “old trailer” causes to the road it is driven on. In a

---

<sup>92</sup> (Nuru-Jeter *et al.*, 2009; Dulin-Kieta *et al.*, 2011; Priest *et al.*, 2016).

country with a white majority, other ethnicities can never feel at home because they are eternally “out of place”. The angry speaker at the beginning of the poem becomes the resigned older speaker that concludes it; her tone is one of a person who feels exhausted. The “trailer” is already heavy, but what makes it heavier is the fact that it has to endure a long existence “out of place”.

The duration of stay in American appears not to be a factor in making the life of Halaby’s Arab American speakers of “journey”, “grandfathers”, and “home” any easier. Moreover, their sense of estrangement in America includes an estrangement from the self. The speaker of “journey” becomes neither the writer nor the mother she wishes to be. The speaker of “grandfathers” wishes to read in a language she is ignorant about and hates the language she knows. The speaker of “home”, however, sees herself nothing but an old heavy thing forced to endure its existence. Their restlessness in their dwelling home, America, puts them in a constant search for a home which they do not find. Not even the home of origin functions as the real home. This sense of continuous loss or estrangement is part of an excruciating diasporic experience some Arab Americans go through feeling that they are “removed of the Middle East” and “equally removed [...] from the United States” (Salaita, 2006, p. 153), a feeling that is captured clearly in Halaby’s poem “home (one last time)”, (Halaby, 2012, p. 72)<sup>93</sup>:

Palestine is only home when I am away

Jordan is home when I am there

I can claim neither

except in stories [*sic.*] (“home (one last time)”)

---

<sup>93</sup> Hereafter “home (one last time)”.



The desire to belong is innate in us as human beings especially when we are caught in a context where we feel that we are labeled as different. This desire in such a context has an “elusive nature” (Rajaratnam, 2009). The illusional element in this desire ignites imagination to create a place that feels like home even if this place is only fictitious. For the speaker above, Palestine and Jordan are home only when they are at a distance. That is to say, she craves them romantically but fails to associate with them in reality when she is “there”. That the speaker cannot “claim” either her homeland “except in stories” reflect in a direct sense what Salaita (2006) states about Arab Americans’ feelings of being removed from the real meaning of home, whether this is the home land or the “dwelling place”<sup>94</sup>. This tension is not alien to the experience of people in diaspora, particularly, Arab Americans. Hala Deep Jabbour, an Arab American activist, clearly states that defining which “heritage” one should stick to is no easy task when you have two places to belong to, that of your origin and the other where you dwell:

Often I wonder whether being an Arab American is something I passed on to my children as extra baggage in their lives, something not really their own. I ask myself whether that will expand their horizons or limit their chances and choices in this society [...] Part of me wishes for them to retain their heritage. Another part wants them to become ordinary Americans, as comfortable and natural in this society as fish in water.

There is sadness in that each choice involves a loss. (Afkhamy, 1994, p. 61)

The “extra baggage” implies burden and heaviness, something like the “old trailer” of the poem “home” above. This burden could be your identity, or who you are when you are Arab American. In fact, a stable identity is, in many cases, elusive, and defining it is problematic (Hall, 1990), not only in the case of Jabbour’s children above, nor either in the case of the younger speakers we discussed before. In the poem “letter to my brother” (Halaby, 2012, pp.

---

<sup>94</sup> Proctor (2003).

34-35)<sup>95</sup> we have a speaker of 57 but who is lost and still strives to find out who she is. At 57 and in America, this older Arab American speaker feels alienated from herself, from the only language she knows how to speak, and from her big Americanized body:

a lifetime spent longing  
for my real self  
for a view I can breathe  
for a world I understand  
the truth came too late  
my footsteps are stained in English  
my clumsy shoes large and American (“my brother”)

She feels uprooted and estranged. As can be clearly seen, all the speakers of Laila Halaby offer examples of painful adjustment to the surrounding environment. They contrast greatly with Mohja Kahf’s speakers who are relentlessly capable of making gains out of any reality no matter how racially biased it is. The middle-aged speaker of “my brother” is not aggressive like Halaby’s other speakers before her, however, she is still disgusted by her Americanness as are the others. “English” language stains her and “American” standards are “clumsy” for her. She feels suffocated and lost. This speaker’s later wish in the poem, to have a DNA test, is an expression of an extreme longing to belong to a real place in the “right place”:

let me swab your DNA  
prove that it matches mine  
that we are the same  
split shortly after my birth  
you in your right place

---

<sup>95</sup> Hereafter “my brother”.

I too far away

always longing for mine (“my brother”)

Her desire to have a DNA test is a possible revelation of the antagonistic feeling she harbors toward being clumsily categorized. In America, she has been labeled for long enough as someone she is not, *so would not a laboratory test put an end to America’s racial worries and its endless races categories?* Historical facts tell about the clumsiness of American politics in categorizing Arab Americans. Michelle Hartman (2006, p. 145) writes about how Arab Americans “were first considered ‘not white,’ then ‘not quite white,’ then later legally ‘became white’”. This vague and constantly changing definition of who Arab Americans are is certainly annoying to, and bewildering for, this minority group. Asking her brother to let her “swap” his DNA to “prove” that she has a well- defined genetic match in Jordan, and that they “are the same” (“my brother”) is a strong expression of two things: firstly, her reluctance to consider America her match, and secondly her desire to belong to her land of origin. Her American genome will not help, since America is still not sure where to place this speaker and her ilk. An Arab genome analysis may place her in the “right place,” in her homeland, even if this land is “too far away” (“my brother”). Ironically, whereas 57 years of striving to grow up and become a human being with a strong sense of belonging and a well-defined identity in America may prove futile, a tiny drop of blood taken for a DNA test in distant Jordan may give her that which she has spent her life striving for: to be and to belong.

### **Diaspora is the Unspeakable: Withdrawal as a Survival Model**

Elmaz Abinader’s speaker is neither the antagonistic speaker of Halaby, nor the integrative speaker of Kahf. Abinader’s speaker is a passive speaker who withdraws within herself to survive. Her withdrawal is tantamount to an escapist attitude in certain diasporic contexts that demand an interaction or a reaction. Although a survival strategy, and on the surface a passive one, it is no less aggressive than Halaby’s antagonism. It is a withdrawal

that allows the speaker to survive, but one that creates an environment of survival which is painful.

In the poem “THROAT I” (Abinader, 2014, p. 51)<sup>96</sup>, is a realization, by the speaker, of the dilemma of Arab Americans who cannot naturally connect to America without the outside interference of a “conjunction” that establishes the connection (“THROAT I”): “Perhaps explain/ that many things are true, I am connected without conjunction/ and the woman with my face died with all our names woven under her hair” (“THROAT I”). The longevity of generational survival in America does not make Arab Americans’ issue of belonging a straightforward free of obstruction experience. On the contrary, and as the lines above state, Arab Americans still feel that they need to “explain” who they are, needing to emphasize that they are “connected” yet unable to deny the “conjunction” or the obstruction. This conjunction could be a small living symbol such as a punctuation mark: the hyphen, which imposes and separates the two parts: the Arab and the American. The shift from the “conjunction” to the metaphorical image of the woman who died with “names woven under her hair” (“THROAT I”) is a manifestation of the state of confusion experienced by those who fail to prove that they are “connected” (“THROAT I”, Abinader, 2014, p. 51). Their outward appearance is alive, but inwardly, they are buried under the hair of a dead woman; that woman's true self is washed away by diaspora. This image is a reminder of one diasporic experience many Arab Americans have gone through when they were forced to change their patronymics in order to be naturalized as Americans (Haddad, 2004). This practice, though forced upon the first immigrants only, continued to be performed voluntarily by some Arab Americans in order to feel socially accepted in the host country (Kulczycki and Lobo, 2001) (Haddad, 2004). In fact, Abinader herself tells about a racist experience she endured when

---

<sup>96</sup> Hereafter “THROAT I”.

she was “denied her Americanism, on the basis of her looks [...] being denied her civil rights as an American [...] [and was] ‘branded’” (El Said, 2003, p. 207). In an interview with the TV channel Al Jazeera (*A Date in Exile*, 2007), Abinader tells the viewers the story of how she was saddened when her teacher at school tried to bury her Lebanese identity by forcing her to accept an American name. Her speaker, although incapable of proving that she is “connected without a conjunction” but is wishing to, (“THROAT I”) succeeds in letting the reader feel the pain that is obstructed in the throat. Though unspoken and claimed to be “in the throat”, rhetorically speaking, this pain is not only spoken, but is published and read by many. Thus, an obvious fact remains: that of a tension between the voice of the speaker and the fact of the poem, the existence of which belies the powerlessness of the speaker.

Obviously, the less than straightforward nature of the hyphenated identity is a source of continuous confusion which is not easy to define, to “speak” about or to “verbalize”:

if I could speak

the hyphen making space between the word and what it needs

then I could learn how this body can inhabit two worlds—

[...]

I could verbalize

a delicacy of reference, elbow the comma to clarify, that I am not recent

but a long time resident holding a steady job, not belonging to unworthy society

(“THROAT I”)

She cannot speak about the hyphenated identity; neither can she prove that she is connected to America in a straightforward manner. Voluntarily or not, her voice is silenced, but the pen speaks on her behalf, and in writing about it, she wisely, though quietly, maintains and heals her diasporic pain and identity dilemma. Her defensive statement “I am not recent/ [...] not belonging to unworthy society,” reminds us of Halaby’s speaker’s longing to belong to the

“right place” after she is discriminated against in America (“home (one last time)”). Similarly here, Abinader’s speaker seems to feel marginalized, threatened, or labeled as a member of an “unworthy society”. The conditional statement “if I could speak” which is also the opening line of the poem is in fact no less expressive in recounting the dilemma of belonging and identity from which Arab Americans suffer. Obviously, there is something preventing the speaker of the poem from being expressive about how she exactly feels. So instead, she chooses to withdraw herself from direct confrontations and seemingly saves herself from tension. In the vicinity of her pen and paper, however, and when sufficiently shielded from the pressure of the racist society around her, she reveals it all.

In “Living with Oppositions” we have another speaker who is involved in a withdrawal tantamount to escapism. Central to this poem is the speaker’s father, an immigrant who tries to acculturate himself to America without abandoning his Lebanese ways. The immigrant father, however, fails to be accepted as American because of what some biased Americans call his “attitude problem” (“Oppositions”). The speaker is sorry for her father, but like the speaker before her, she withholds her reactions, but releases her pen:

It’s an attitude problem, like my father,  
you observed, going to the carnival  
at the firemen’s hall in his small Pennsylvania  
mining town. He wore a blue suit,  
very fine, Italian maybe or even  
Brazilian. He offered his hand  
to all the men in their beer covered tee shirts

*Jimmy, how you doing?* (“Oppositions”)

Ironically, even the elegant father is not safe from the racist behavior of the untidy looking American men around him. This immigrant-father’s appearance in an elegant, “very fine,”

("Oppositions") Italian or Brazilian "blue suit" ("Oppositions") for a rural carnival is ridiculed by the biased American onlooker, who fails in turn to ridicule the "beer covered tee shirts" of American men ("Oppositions"). This onlooker is superior enough to classify the father's elegant appearance as an "attitude problem" ("Oppositions"). In addition, this father's cordiality in offering "his hand/ to all men" ("Oppositions"), is ridiculed as part of his "attitude problem" ("Oppositions"). Undoubtedly, the scene is highly offensive, but the reaction of the speaker appears to be confusing. In fact, the immigrant's daughter, who is the poem's speaker and an eyewitness, withdraws from the complications of the racial scene and escapes the scene all together. Embarrassed, she turns her "foot/ around in the gravel, began to dig/ an escape tunnel" ("Oppositions"). Clearly enough, the reaction of Abinader's Arab American speaker contrasts with the anger of Halaby's speaker and the defensiveness of Kahf's. Worse than escaping, she needlessly apologizes for her father's "attitude problem" by explaining that he "is not crazy./ he is tired of being foreign, of trying/ so hard just to breathe, to get a little light/ of his own" ("Oppositions"). There is something suffocating and unfortunate in the image of a daughter who needs to defend the misinterpreted civility of her father, while knowing that her father is not feeling at home, and that he lives in an environment where he is ridiculed and his breath and light are taken from him. Her reaction, though passive and escapist, illustrates the intensity of the moment which the speaker could not directly confront or bluntly criticize. Her embarrassment and her unnecessary apologies are indicative enough of the pressure and control of the majority over the conduct and the behavior of the minority. The majority has the right to criticize, to classify, and even to ridicule the minorities. The minorities, however, need to always show themselves to be cordial, to endlessly apologize for nothing, and to constantly display loyalty and patience in order to be accepted as Americans. These minorities' homely traditions, names, looks, and behaviors, unthreatening as they are, should always be put under racial scrutiny which they

have limited rights to stand against. Consequently, they feel marginalized and eventually silenced. Abinader's speaker is telling a story in which pain is silently harboured, and though hidden, is felt and clearly defined. Commenting on this, Elia (2006) explains that even in the twenty first century, Arab Americans, and Muslims, find themselves "still explaining" themselves, "still refuting egregious stereotypes, still on the defense" (p. 159). Time only deepens Abinader speaker's sense of estrangement in her diaspora. This speaker's only choice is to adapt in spite of the racist behaviors she, and her father, have to endure. Nevertheless, and as Faragallah, Schum, and Webb (1997) write, "identification and acculturation may not imply satisfaction with the new culture," (p. 183) especially when this culture inferiorizes the Arabs (Kulczycki and Lobo, 2001) or when it deluges them with "durable stereotypes" (Wald, 2009, p. 1307).

In "FALLING INTO THE OCEAN" (Abinader, 2014, p. 21)<sup>97</sup>, the same Arab American father who has been ridiculed above, hears the news about his home town in Lebanon being ruined and forgotten; this is the same father who, for twenty years, has not given up his Lebanese ways, is now "unmoved by this sinking" of his own hometown. That he is "unmoved" by the news about his homeland is a reflection on the numbing effect of this man's prolonged diaspora. His soul is so fragile that he is unable to react to the news or show an interest; instead he admits that both his American self and his Lebanese self are of no use, that his struggle to stand up and to remain is in vain, and that after years "the surrender is predictable" ("FALLING"). Surrender is an ultimate manifestation of withdrawal; it is an escapist behavior *par excellence* and one that is truly devastating. In contexts such as the ones in which Abinader's speaker has been presented, and with this speaker's withdrawing attitude momentarily guarding him/ her, the speaker's inner self turns into a fragile, lifeless entity to

---

<sup>97</sup> Hereafter "FALLING".



the point where it becomes “easy to let go [...] of home or homeland, of tribe or country” (“FALLING”). In this father’s readiness to give up not only his homeland but also his “tribe or country” is an emphasis on the uselessness of an identity for those who suffer for so long that they feel that to belong is not even an issue anymore. This father’s reaction demonstrates a possible example of a generational gap. Even though the other younger speakers experience pain resulting from their ambivalent status, they still react. Abinader’s younger speakers meditate upon their repressed status as Arab Americans, Halaby’s react angrily to that status, and Kahf’s turn it into a chance to succeed and coexist. Eventually, this father’s patience that has been endured for years now falls apart, and everything and everyone begins to “sink slowly, not into the ground or into the ocean,/ but into the skin so tough we leave bits everywhere we go” (“FALLING”). Diaspora and its “tough” nature have hardened the whole family. When the father falls, the hardened family breaks down, and the effect of the fall is collateral.

Similarly, in “THIS HOUSE, MY BONES” (Abinader, 2014, p. 38)<sup>98</sup> there is a powerless Arab American speaker who, in a moment of epiphany, realizes that it is time to “incarcerate” (“BONES”) one’s will and to admit that everything that once connected a dispersed person to home is a trivial thing as light as a “thread,” and as tiny as a “needle.” Undoubtedly, this depressing realization ushers in the speaker’s sense of hopelessness which is the result of years of fruitless struggle. It is thus time for the speaker to stop struggling and “to leave” (“BONES”):

Fear is uprising rattling against the incarceration of will—  
time to leave  
you think the history writes you out

---

<sup>98</sup> Hereafter “BONES”.

of this ruined civilization you don't know  
except for the wine-colored thread woven in your hair  
the shard of cobalt needle to awakening  
and the chambers of hearts weakening ("BONES")

"Fear" dominates the scene. The speaker seems to be fearful of acknowledging the inevitable truth about her homeland and about her sense of not belonging there. For many dispersed human beings, homeland and its memory are cherished and idealized as long as they are at a distance. But the reality could be that there is nothing there to be idealized, for the cherished civilization is "ruined", and its history, including the speaker as part of this history, is "writ[ten] [...] out". The reference to the speaker's hair that is "wine" in color is made to give this hair a tangible presence, and this contrasts with the speaker's heart that is "weakening". The speaker could in fact be in this homeland that she has been idealizing from her distant "dwelling place"<sup>99</sup>. Now that the speaker is in this homeland she tries to repress a realization that is opposite to the idolized far off image. Before her repressed realization takes hold of the scene, she expresses a wish to "leave" and while leaving she denies this land which becomes a "ruined civilization you don't know" and to which she is connected through fragile things, her hair color, a needle that is "shard" or broken, and a heart that is "weakening". Is it possible that the speaker is embarrassed about her homeland and she thus wants to escape? Hatem (1998) quotes Elmaz Abinader as an example of an Arab American who falls victim to a "deeply held belief that being both Arab and American" is an "oxymoron to the mainstream: one negated the other" (no page). She adds that Abinader avoids being identified as an Arab but labels herself as native-born American who is aware of Arab and Arab American culture. Thus, one can say that Abinader, who is the poet behind

---

<sup>99</sup> Proctor (2003).

these surrendering speakers, has bequeathed her escapist attitude to the characters that she created and to whom she assigned roles in the poems she produced.

I will conclude the discussion of this section with the poem “COMING CLEAN” (Abinader, 2014, p. 27)<sup>100</sup> as an example of a total relapse after the previous examples of withdrawal and surrender. Not surprisingly in this poem, the speaker, who is now stricken with age also surrenders, but in this surrender, there is a relapse into a primordial status. The surrender happens after the realization that one is left to loneliness in a “dwelling place”<sup>101</sup> where no one can be trusted: “In this desert/ we walk without companions/ or shade. We feed off the sun/ the only living creature/ we can rely on” (“COMING CLEAN”). When the “dwelling place”<sup>102</sup> becomes a destitute “desert” where one is deprived of “companions”, a relapse into a primitive status becomes a possibility. In such a status, “stories”, “tears”, and “glances”, turn into meaningless things, and so do one’s memories of home’s “stones” and of “yellow papers”, the letters that once came from that home. All of these homeland tokens should be erased to free the lonely speaker from the burden of meaninglessly carrying them:

Take back your stories, carts of stones,  
tears and glances. Take back the tokens,  
yellow papers in languages that do not fade  
with age (“COMING CLEAN”)

To “take back” things held dear is to express indifference and powerlessness. Clinging to these tokens and feelings of home provides no substance for resistance in the diaspora, and so they become meaningless, simply adding extra pain to the memories. The “stories” from home, the “tokens”, and the letters written in homeland language are food for a dispersed

---

<sup>100</sup> Hereafter “COMING CLEAN”.

<sup>101</sup> Proctor (2003).

<sup>102</sup> *ibid.*

person's soul, but when the speaker lets go of them, they create a vacuum in the speaker's soul. If this vacuum is created, the body is bowed down, as we see in the image of the speaker who is destined to "live head down/ for who knows how long" ("COMING CLEAN"). This total annihilation of soul and body is only to be expected as the result of a prolonged diaspora where belonging to a place or to a race continue to be unsettled.

### **Diaspora is Bewilderment: Dissociation-Association as a Survival Model**

As has been shown in the discussion of the adjustment strategies above, there seem to be no two similar strategies of adjustment; the different Arab American speakers, though created by poets who are all third generation Arab Americans and are all Levantine, employ individual or independent techniques to help them move on in America. Naomi Nye is no exception to the norm. Her Arab American speakers adjust themselves to life outside the land of origin by using two very diverse strategies: association and dissociation. Nye's prevailing diasporic voice is the voice of her immigrant Palestinian-American father, Aziz, who, in order to fit into America, involves himself in American society and American ways while associating himself with his homeland. In fact, this father is the voice of Palestinians where an American context requires an Arab voice to be heard whether to present or to defend images of Arabs or of Palestinians in America. This status seems to make the father strong enough to continue embracing his Palestinian self even in America. The other younger speakers of the rest of Nye's diaspora poems are the opposite to the associated father in the sense that they dissociate themselves and their "us" is more an indication of "Americanness" than Arabness (El Said, 2003, p. 203). In Nye's poetry, the Arab American daughter, who is the speaker of many diasporic poems "maintains her distance as 'you' and 'we' may be comparable but not identical" and "never claims a totally Arab identity" (El Said, 2003, p. 204). As the discussion below will show, a younger speaker is always on the verge of embracing Palestine, but, unlike the father, this speaker is not fully explicit about being

Palestinian. In fact, the poetry of diaspora by Nye is a good example of how adjustment might also be subjected to intergenerational difference. It is possible in the case of Nye's speakers to interpret this intergenerational difference as follows: the closer one's relationship to homeland is, the more involved, or associated, s/he is with homeland issues, and the further away one is, whether in time or in place, from homeland, the less one she/he is involved or associated with it. Fitting in is drastically different. This variation is yet another proof that diasporic experiences are very individualistic and that there is no specific or uniform law of adjustment or adaptation. Nye's speakers' associate-dissociate strategy of adjustment is also an indication that the process of adjustment is not an easy one, and that subsequent assimilation can be subjected to segmentation (Ajrouch and Jamal, 2007).

In *Transfer* (2011), Nye's latest collection of poetry, the Palestinian diaspora is contemplated by the Arab American father. A chapter entitled "'Just Call me Aziz' II Poems-Titles by Aziz Shihab-From his Notebooks" is almost entirely about this father's own diasporic and adjustment experiences in America. The title of the chapter, as the reader sees, implies that the poems tell the story of the father's quest in the diaspora. It is a quest, as I have already stated, that does not lose sight of homeland, Palestine, which is central to many poetic contexts. Understandably, Naomi Nye the poet and the creator of this speaker, whose experience in his "dwelling place"<sup>103</sup> is always associated with his memory of his homeland Palestine, cannot fully dissociate herself from him or from his roots, which is Nye's and her younger speakers' roots as well, no matter how much the Americanness of the younger generation dominates. In a sense, this Palestinian-American poet decides to let the persona of her father recount those elements from which her younger Americanized speakers dissociate

---

<sup>103</sup> *ibid.*

themselves. Effectively, another story of diaspora is told revealing the still diverse nature of this experience outside one's homeland.

Perhaps Nye's, or rather Aziz's, "We Did Not Have Drinking Water in the Middle of the Ocean" (Nye, 2011, p. 30)<sup>104</sup> best describes the hazardous sea-journey of the refugee and his subsequent restlessness, and ushers in the beginning of the speaker's diaspora. The fact that Aziz has been in the "land of the free" for long does not erase a memory of the homeland that is still grief-stricken:

Homeland trampled, ripped in pieces,  
often by people who weren't there.  
How dare they?  
They had their own interests.  
They couldn't see us.  
We were tiny as pebbles to them  
that you push with the toe of your shoe ("Ocean")

The image of the dismantled homeland and the other image which turns its people into something as unworthy as "tiny [...] pebbles" reveal the pain and the humiliation the speaker feels even though he has made it safe out of the fearful place. To further emphasize the offence he still feels, this speaker describes the fate of his people as something so meaningless to the world that it is left to gamble with "by people who weren't there". The image of the "ripped in pieces" homeland, which is Palestine after the division, parallels the image of the "tiny [...] pebbles" in the sense that both the habitat and its habitants are reduced to down-trodden entities pushed "with the toe" of the "shoe". "They couldn't see us"

---

<sup>104</sup> Hereafter "Ocean".

is inclusive; the Arab American speaker still sees himself as a member of the “us” but not far removed from his Palestinian people (“Ocean”).

Contrary to this father who associates himself with his people is the Palestinian-American younger speaker who, in similar circumstances, dissociates herself from her Palestinian people. When in “Renovation” (Nye, 2005, pp. 40-43)<sup>105</sup> this young speaker is temporarily displaced pending the rebuilding of her American house, a chance to contemplate the displacement of *her* Palestinian people is created. Nonetheless, the chance is seized but in a dissociative manner where the speaker and her American world become “us” (“Renovation”) and Palestine and the Palestinians become “they” (“Renovation”). That is to say, opposite to Aziz above, the speaker here excludes herself from them, the Palestinians, and only sees their displacement from her American distance. “During all this,” says the speaker about the renovation of her American house, “the Palestinians overseas were being confined to their homes, if they had homes [...] The whole time we were putting our house back together, more Palestinians were losing their homes” (“Renovation”). The speaker in “Renovation” does indeed make this point and raises people’s awareness of the Palestinian diaspora, but hers is a statement where the “US” vs. “THEM” dichotomy controls the scene to contrast with Aziz’s inclusive manner.

“A Kansas Preacher Called Me Muscleman” (Nye, 2011, p. 34)<sup>106</sup> and “My Perfect Stranger” (Nye, 2005, pp. 78-79)<sup>107</sup> highlight the associate-dissociate strategies of adjustment used by Aziz and Nye’s other younger speaker. In “Kansas Preacher” an American preacher in Kansas approaches Aziz and talks to him in a manner that reveals misconceptions about the immigrant’s Arab culture. Although in such a context an immigrant may feel vulnerable,

---

<sup>105</sup> Hereafter “Renovation”.

<sup>106</sup> Hereafter “Kansas Preacher”.

<sup>107</sup> Hereafter “Stranger”.

Aziz does not. Thanks to his positive attitude and his self-esteem, Aziz is unyielding and humorous too. The story of misconception begins from the title of the poem where the word “Muscleman” is a distorted version of Muslim:

And I was a thin guy too. Such a joke!

*Just call me Aziz.* He wanted to change me.

As-Is. Make me stand up

to his own angel songs. (“Kansas Preacher”)

Aziz’s sense of humor guards him against any possible racist implication of the scene. He chooses to understand being called a “Muscleman” as a joke, his “I was a thin guy too” further emphasizes his neutral, or rather cynical, interpretation of that joke. The twist that contrasts being “thin” with a “[m]uscleman” turns the racial remark into a phonetic mispronunciation, hence saving Aziz from acquiring a cultural grudge. However, when the preacher distorts Aziz’s name, the latter is uncompromising, “call me Aziz” not “[a]s is”. His sense of humor here also implies Aziz’s disapproval of accepting an Americanized status “as” it “is” imposed on him by an American. In doing that, Aziz exempts himself from a large group of Arabs who “willingly” or not “‘Americanized’ their names” (Kulczycki and Lobo, 2001, p.461) (Haddad, 2004) to feel socially accepted and to avoid social bullying. The earlier sections of this chapter made a commentary on this racial practice where, questioning their Arabic names, the speakers of Halaby’s “letter to my brother” and “home” react aggressively, while that of Abinader’s poem “In the throat I” shuts herself out of the world she lives in. Aziz, however, retains his name and his dignity and resists the stereotypes to which this context is prone by culturally aggrandizing himself over the American clergyman:

[...] I told him, Listen,

Bethlehem used to be right next door.

It was my suburb. I walked there



from home as a boy in the pack of pilgrims

burning waxy candles, at dawn (“Kansas Preacher”)

Aziz’s imperative “Listen” dominates the scene now; it silences the Kansas preacher and gives the stage to the Arab Aziz. The boastful images that follow are prim with cultural and religious richness that neither the American preacher, nor America itself can brag about possessing. Bethlehem, the home of Christianity, is Aziz’s playground. Moreover, it is both the birthplace of Jesus and of Aziz. The preacher should not further underestimate Aziz for he himself was born where the preacher’s prophet was born, in the place where his heart and the hearts of million others yearn to be. Salaita (2006) comments on what he calls the American version of Christianity that is imperialist in its nature. He writes:

Christianity is our indigenous religion. It is a religion that was created in our backyards and forms an enormous part of our cultural identity [...] Our churches have stood for centuries, sometimes millennia. The pictures of Jesus in those churches show him with brown skin and wavy hair [...] Our Jesus is tough, with Semitic features. Our Jesus looks like an Arab. (p.186)

The description that follows of the pilgrimage route, which Aziz has walked a lot as a little boy, could be a reference to the Via Dolorosa in the old part of Jerusalem. In referring to this street, Aziz, the “Muscleman”, tells the preacher in a metaphorical way that he has been a Christian pilgrim many times before meeting an American Christian preacher. Aziz is in fact showing his historic muscles to the preacher and replying in a covertly superior way to America’s sense of self-aggrandizement. He then addresses the preacher in a direct manner and overtly tells him that he is too “thick” to get into, or to understand, such a sophisticated cultural context

I think you can hear Jesus cry too.

And I can tell you where the secret door is,

into more than one shrine,  
how far down you have to stoop to enter it.  
But maybe you're too tall and thick. I don't think  
you could get in there ("Kansas Preacher")

The auditory image of the "cry" of "Jesus" is meant to further indulge the scene with historical and cultural richness, something the preacher may not have heard about before. Aziz raises his culturally boastful tone and turns the preacher's ignorance of Arab's culture, be a deliberate ignorance or not, against itself. Whereas the Kansas preacher needs to "stoop to enter" a shrine in Palestine, a native of Palestine like Aziz, and whatever his religion is, has access to all the glory of Christianity and of any other cultures that exist in this holy land. The rebuff in "as is" and "Muscleman" is returned when Aziz denies the American preacher the glory of Christianity because the latter is unfit, "you are too tall and thick/ I don't think/ you could get in there" ("Kansas Preacher"). "Kansas Preacher" is a demonstration of man who proudly defends his native identity and does it eloquently. He knows how to associate himself with his homeland and to invest in this association to best suit his endeavor in adjusting himself to America.

In contrast, put in a similar situation, a younger Arab American speaker dissociates herself from her Arab people in what I would label as an extra-cautious manner. On a plane and in front of little Layla in the poem entitled "Stranger", this speaker fails to disclose her Arab origin. Although she is enchanted by the presence of a smart little girl (Layla) of Arab descent and by the "familiar accent of the Middle East [that] flavored her mother's voice" ("Stranger"), the speaker withholds her emotions and hides the "tears" that fill her eyes when the presence of the little Arab American child reminds her of her roots. Interestingly, even when little Layla "drew a blue flower with green leaves [...] wrote TO NAOMI, LOVE LAYLA" ("Stranger") and handed the painting to the speaker, that speaker continues to dissociate herself from the little Arab child, from the mother, and from the whole Arab-

related context. She “didn’t mention” (“Stranger”) anything that could reveal a shared identity between her and the little child. It is true that *in absentia* the speaker dedicates her whole poem to Layla, the speaker’s Arab counterpart, yet ironically, she chooses to entitle it “Stranger” as if to estrange herself from the root to which the little child stands.

The contrast between the innocence of the child in the above encounter and the self-repressive manner of the speaker is as significant as is the gap between the older speaker Aziz and the younger speaker of “Stranger” in the sense that the former could boast about his Arab heritage in front of an American preacher who has inferiorized him, while the latter fails to empathize with a little child with whom she shares similar roots and diasporic destiny. The constant reluctance of the younger speakers in Nye’s diaspora poetry to be identified as Arabs is a counter-argument to the common belief that since 1970s, Arab Americans started to nurture their Arabness more than the first waves of Arabs who arrived in America in the 1880s (Kulczycki and Lobo, 2001; Sondoal, 1993). While this reluctance functions as a counter-argument, it offers an emphasis that the Arab American’s diasporic experience varies and how this might reflect either covertly or overtly on the difficulties this racially-marked group go through in order to feel socially accepted in American society.

A similar dissociative or distancing attitude is once more taken by another Arab American speaker in “The Sweet Arab, the Generous Arab” (Nye, 2005, p. 57)<sup>108</sup>. In this poem, the speaker brings the often-misrepresented Arab character into focus. An Arab, the speaker says, is a generous man who “extends his hand” (“The Sweet Arab”) to everyone, and “inviting” all “in for a Coke” (“The Sweet Arab”), even though he is a poor refugee living in a tent:

Since no one else is mentioning you enough.

---

<sup>108</sup> Hereafter “The Sweet Arab”.

The Arab who extends his hand.

The Arab who will not let you pass

His tiny shop without a welcoming word.

The refugee inviting us in for a Coke (“The Sweet Arab”)

The cordial behavior of the Arab is an opportunity for the speaker to brag about him as a kinsman, but, like the Arab American speaker who fails to identify with little Layla, this speaker also chooses to distance and to estrange herself from him. For the speaker here, this Arab is only a man whose “tiny shop” they happen to pass and whose generosity deserves “mentioning”. He is the “you” of the poem, and the speaker is the “us,” and the “we” is absent.

To draw a clearer image of my reading of Nye’s speaker’s dissociate behaviors when it comes to the speaker’s Arab identity, I will compare her poem “The sweet Arab, the generous Arab” to Kahf’s “I Can Scent an Arab Man a Mile Away” (*EFS*, 29-30)<sup>109</sup>. In these two poems, written by poets who come from similar backgrounds, and whose speakers are young Arab Americans who belong to the same generation, there is an obvious distinction. The dissociative behavior of Nye’s speaker gives way to a bold, strong, and even sensual identification with Kahf’s speaker. In “I Can Scent” the Arab man be him “black-haired,” or not, “sexy” or not, Muslim or not, is called “mine, my” man:

My stubble-chinned,

black-haired, tawny-skinned

Arab male kin, the white robed

and the black-tied of them (“I Can Scent”)

---

<sup>109</sup> Hereafter “I Can Scent”.

A strong sense of possessiveness prevails in the poem. The “[m]y” which begins the poem is a strong reference on the part of the speaker to the blood-tie between her and the “stubble-chinned/ black-haired, [and] tawny-skinned” Arab man. Additionally, that this man is tough-looking is, for this speaker, something to celebrate rather than something to be embarrassed about. Interestingly, this speaker is so enthusiastic about her Arab kinsman that she is even struck by his disheveled appearance. Not only that, but her attraction takes an extreme turn when she celebrates her kinsmen’s masculine sensuality:

They may be  
mustachio’d, macho, patriarchal,  
sexist, egotistical, parochial—  
— but they’re mine, my  
sleek and swarthy, hairy-chested,  
curly-headed lovers of the Prophet  
and lovers of the Virgin,  
sons of the city street and village boys,  
wanderers tribal and global (“I Can Scent”)

Descriptions like “macho, patriarchal, sexist, egotistical” coincide with orientalist stereotypes about the “sensual” Arab and may invite an unwanted negative interpretation on the part of the American reader. Nevertheless, the speaker of the poem is willing to embrace these stereotypes rather than succumb to her reader’s ideals. Nomads or not, Muslims “lovers of the Prophet,” or Christians “lovers of the Virgin,” “sons of the city and village boys,” they “are mine,” Kahf’s speaker asserts. There exists a major contrast between Kahf and Nye. Nye’s speaker is unable to react to the innocent touch of little Layla and is unable to call that refugee a relative, whereas Kahf is proud of her kinsmen, even of the rough or strange way they speak in Arabic: “I know them by the growling *ghayns*/ and gnawing *dads* and hoarse

hungry *khas*/ [...] *a language, theirs—ours—mine./ My men*,” who speak “a language, theirs—ours—mine” (“I Can Scent”). The sense of possessiveness which begins the poem continues throughout to let the speaker identify herself strongly with her Arab kinsmen. The “*theirs-ours-mine./ My men*” are repeated more than once in the poem and contrast with the dissociative “Us” vs. “Them” in Nye’s poetry. Even when Nye’s speaker tries to take a stronger, more open step toward her Arabness in “The Sweet Arab”, she remains aloof and keeps her distance.

The patterns I have explored above show that the perception of and the interaction with the diasporic experience vary even within a single generation and also from one generation to another. The four poets central to this study are all third generation Arab Americans yet their poems explore and respond to diaspora and other relevant issues such as identity, belonging, and adjustment in different ways. Whereas Halaby’s speakers appear to antagonize the environment around them by rejecting the American culture to a self-torturous level, Kahf’s speakers are more in control of the situation. They preserve their own ethnic roots while in the process of adjusting themselves to life in America which they adore as much as they adore their home of origin. Abinader’s speakers, however, choose to withdraw themselves from cultural confrontation and do not seem to align themselves neither with their ethnic reality nor with the American culture. Nye’s speakers employ two adjustment strategies, association and dissociation. The older father chooses to confront racial contexts in America without denying or marginalizing his Arab-self. Instead, his sense of humor gives him a space to associate with his ethnic heritage in a superior way without being rude or disrespectful. In contrast to this father are Nye’s younger Arab American speakers who dissociate themselves from their Arab identity and almost deny or erase their ethnic roots while acknowledging the Arabs as the good “others”. Nye’s youngsters’ Americanness is stronger than their Arabness.

Whether it is a moving toward or moving away from or moving against one's ethnic culture or the culture of the "dwelling place"<sup>110</sup>, it is proof that human beings are in a continuous quest to find a comfortable identity and a model of living that helps them survive peacefully. The patterns discussed above prove that to talk collectively about the experience of Arab American in their American "dwelling place"<sup>111</sup> cannot be the correct approach for as diverse a group as the Arab Americans (Pharaon, 2008). They converge in certain areas as "members of a homogenous opinion group" (Sandoval, 1993, p. 304) but they do also diverge on many personal levels.

### **The Arab American Speaks of Rivers<sup>112</sup>**

What is beyond survival? Human beings are not created for the mere purpose of finding strategies to endure their existence. It is their right to be regarded with respect even when this identity is hyphenated. Markers of a man's identity like language, "formula of greetings, names of typical food, or designation of rituals" when retained, they give the dispersed person a sense of cohesion (Ben Rafael, 2013, p.849). Returning to these markers of one's roots, even when one cannot speak the homeland language, allows for a possession of "a stronger sense of identity" (Honko, 1995, p.141). In this section, I will analyze the homeland symbols, or markers, that are employed in Kahf's poetry as examples of resistance and as self-esteem stimulators and means of cohesion in the diaspora. I will then move to the discussion of these symbols as they exist in the poetry of the other three poets; Nye, Abinader, and Halaby.

---

<sup>110</sup> Proctor (2003).

<sup>111</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>112</sup> I am inspired here by Langston Hughes' 1921 poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" in which he boasts about his African roots to silence discriminatory voices in America in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (Hughes in Ferguson, M., Salter, M., and Stallworthy, J., 2005).

Resorting to homeland heritage or markers and assuming a nationalist stance when the speaker is overcome by loneliness or when one feels the pressure of an antagonistic racial context, are factors which express a desire not only to belong but also to be “held in high regard” (Wood, 2014, p.100). In the case of many Arab American speakers, the Arab part of their identity facilitates their existence and nourishes their self-esteem in the diaspora even if they manage to overcome issues of adjustment. Homeland markers such as history, geography, or food, even if they are only imagined, help “the mind to intensify its own sense of itself” (Hall, 1990, p.232) because they highlight the speaker’s identity and solidify his/her existence. While most of the speakers in this chapter do more or less dramatize their homeland heritage in order to acquire the highest sense of self-esteem possible in their dwelling place, it is Kahf’s speakers whose boastful homeland tone is the most expressive. The root for this boastful tone could be biographical. Kahf herself comes from a Syrian family that has many historically renowned members, particularly women, who are also involved in national politics (Davis, Zine, and Taylor, 2007).

**“I’ve known rivers:/ Ancient, dusky rivers”<sup>113</sup>**

America and the American people have no right to feel superior, indicate Kahf’s Arab American speakers, whose recalling of homeland heritage erases even the potential feeling of inferiority. I label Kahf’s speakers’ sense of cultural superiority as an example of post-adjustment behavior. That is because not only do they get along in the American society but do that with a sense of superiority in this society where they are labeled as minority.

Young Fatima, in Kahf’s “Fatima” is a new immigrant who is fearful of the unknown and of being lost “in the new world” (“Fatima”). Although her worries are understandable, she does not allow them to dominate her new world. Instead, and to intensify her sense of

---

<sup>113</sup> (Hughes in Ferguson, M., Salter, M., and Stallworthy, J., 2005)



self, Fatima imagines that she is the mother of all, “Eve after Eden,/ Washing up on the shore at Jeddah,” that she is “Zainab after Karbala/ [...] the last shriek/ Of the last despair” (“Fatima”) and that she is “Hagar scraping the sands,/ shaking [her] fist at the angel,/ wresting water from rock,/ creating a new constellation in the sky/ of human settlement” (“Fatima”). Eve, the mother of mankind, Zainab, the brave sister who survived Hussein’s martyrdom and confronted his slayer by his accursed deed, and Hagar, who is the mother of prophets and the giver of Muslims’ sacred water *Zamzam*, all renowned historical women of the East from where Fatima originates, become Fatima’s other selves, reminding her that she is strong and worthy even if she is alienated from her native heritage. In recalling the memory of these women, Fatima uplifts her spirit and quashes negative stereotypes about the immigrant Arabs as unworthy people “viewed suspiciously by mainstream commentators and public alike” (Kulczycki and Lobo, 2001, p.459). Additionally, Fatima constantly reminds herself that hers is a rich literature heritage from which she takes “whatever pleases” her (“Fatima”). She can thus take the worldly “wealth of Khadija/ and the eloquence of Aisha,” the sensual “laughter of Sakina in the city/ [...] the lantern of Rabia in the desert/ [...] passion from Laila’s breasts,/ joy from Shireen’s lips” and the royal “jar of blue face-paint from Nefertiti, / [...] veil from Queen of Sheba/ [...] damascene steel dagger/ from Shajarat al-Durr the sultana” (“Fatima”). By drawing upon and emulating these celebrated women of the East, Fatima is empowered inside out; she has it all, the material, the sensual, and even the leadership powers to conquer her new world. In Fatima’s song is a recollection, and a portrayal of, an Arab culture that is crowded with female figures who are experienced in all the arts of life; trading, literature, sensuality, makeup, and monarchy. More importantly, it is from the shores of Jeddah in the Arab world that the world was given its female component from which springs womanhood all around the world. These women are the role models that come from Fatima’s land of origin. They are not the odalisques, nor the oppressed, nor the

pitiful women who are thought to be emblematic of the Arab women in the “exploitative approach” of Western, or Euro-American feminism even in the twenty first century (Hatem, 1998, no page; Elia, 2006, p. 155; Darraj, 2005).

It is after recalling these women who stand for homeland that the fearful tone of the speaker gives way to an assertive one. Fatima’s use of energizing diction expressing a “boiling” wish to move forward and to “fly” above, leaving “flames” behind, invoke an atmosphere of confidence that opposes the apprehensive one which commenced the poem and marked this speaker’s first entrance to America:

I am looking for the new country  
I am flying toward the outer sea  
My world is in flames behind me  
My world is this moment about to begin  
I am the boiling blood of the heart  
coming up from between the lips (“Fatima”)

In addition to energizing the scene, the diction chosen implies a mythical rebirth by making an allusion to Phoenix. This diction regenerates from the ashes of a “world” left “in flames behind” a creature that is now “flying” and this creature is Fatima the descendent of Eve, Zainab, Hagar, Khadija, Aisha, Sakina, Rabia, Laila, Shireen, Nefertiti, Queen of Sheba, and Shajarat al-Durr, all women, all Eastern, and all are powerful symbols of Fatima’s land of origin.

Even if they are old, Kahf’s women in diaspora are confident and superior because of their historic memory. The grandmother in “My Grandmother” is put in an embarrassing situation when she washes her feet in order to perform an ablution in a sink at Sears, one of America’s department stores. The grandmother is subsequently subjected to the many disapproving looks of the American shoppers. The shoppers’ disapproving looks are

justifiable, but this Arab grandmother is unapologetic. On the contrary, and although what she does is a demonstration of cultural insensitivity, she lets her sense of superiority prevail, ignoring what could have been a serious cultural clash. Proudly, this grandmother turns a deaf ear to the embarrassing situation and indulges herself in the memory of her own foot-washing ritual in the East's best historical places, "Istanbul," "Damascus," "China" and "Aleppo":

*I have washed my feet over Iznik tile Istanbul*

*With water from the world's ancient irrigation systems*

*I have washed my feet in the bathrooms of Damascus*

*Over painted bowls imported from China*

*Among the best families of Aleppo ("My Grandmother")*

This grandmother's memory is both historic and decorous. In the images the grandmother draws upon for her foot-washing rituals in ancient places the reader recalls the luxury of palaces and even the imagined sensuality of a harem. Ironically, however, the "tiles", the "ancient [...] systems", and the "painted bowls [...] from China" in the "best" house of "Aleppo" are all recollected to defend this old lady's indecorous deed at Sears. Her defensive attitude takes an arrogant turn when she sees that she has embarrassed her granddaughter, "[m]y feet," says the grandmother, "are cleaner than their sink./ Worried about their sink, are they? I/ should worry about my feet!" ("My Grandmother"). One interpretation I can give to this speaker's defensive attitude is that it could be an expression of a momentary feeling of insecurity or inferiority befalling her as a result of the shoppers' disapproving looks. Two other facts about this woman might have dictated her reaction. Firstly, she is old and hence less thoughtful about the consequences of her behavior. Secondly, she speaks in Arabic and knows that none of her American onlookers can understand what she means. Therefore, whatever the meaning of her utterance, she is speaking to reassure herself and the speech is only a soliloquy.

It is the “new millennium” yet the speaker of “From the Patio of the Alhambra” (Kahf, pp. 34-35)<sup>114</sup> contemplates, in retrospect, an ancient Arab history recalling, from her abode in America, her visit to the Alhambra palace in Spain. The Arab civilization of Spain, with the Alhambra palace as its most prominent symbol, has always been a source of generational pride for Arabs who yearn for it as a ‘Paradise Lost,’ and deem it as an important chapter in their history. It could be the speaker’s apprehension of the challenges a new era may bring about that the speaker is resorting to a renowned era in her own history. It could also be the speaker’s fear of an Americanized globalization that endangers her sense of self-esteem and identity as one who originates from an area immersed in sophisticated heritage that she is recalling markers of this heritage like the poet “Omar Khayyam,” the philosopher and physician “Ibn Sina,” and the caliph “Harun al-Rashid”:

I flow like wine through the *Rubayat* of Omar Khayyam

and like blood through Ibn Sina’s *Textbook of Medicine*

I am carved into Baghdadi doorframes and was once

whispered passionately by the concubines of Harun al-Rashid (“Alhambra”)

To avoid being swept away by Americanism, and to defy the hegemonic nature of globalization, she soliloquizes at the patio of the Alhambra that which makes her unique and which America lacks: an ancient history that showcases knowledge, beauty, and strength. The delicacy of knowledge and beauty is emphasized in the series of metaphorical images that “flow” like “wine” and “blood” throughout the lines above. She is, the speaker says, a manifestation of the age-old “*Rubayat* of Omar Khayyam,” of the philosophy of Avicenna’s “*Textbook of Medicine*,” and of the art of Baghdad in the palaces of “Harun al-Rashid”. The diction of sensuality imbues the atmosphere with a euphoric sense that downplays the effect

---

<sup>114</sup> Hereafter “Alhambra”.

of the speaker's possible anxiety about whether her identity is in danger of extinction. She is the "wine", the "blood", and one among "concubines" that roam in historic memory. In the new millennium, she is also "the silver dagger-hilts of Omani chieftains" ("Alhambra") where "silver dagger-hilts" and the "chieftain" metaphorically combine artistic beauty and strength culminating in the empowerment of the speaker.

Although the historic memory of the speakers of Abinader and Nye is not as subtle as that of Kahf's speakers, it still recalls from the homeland heritage that which is rich. Mahmud Darwish (1941-2008), the seminal Palestinian exiled poet, and who in the Arab world is "acknowledged as one of the greatest living poets" (Darwish, 2013, p.16), is contemplated by these poets' speakers. In "Endure" (Nye, 2011, p. 88)<sup>115</sup> and after deploring "[m]others and fathers, enduring without justice" their homes having been taken and forced into exile, Nye's speaker remembers Darwish who shares with those mothers and fathers their exilic destiny. She recalls him to them so that they feel "his dapper presence sustaining them". As a poet he is transferred into a savior who would save, through his poetry, an "identity, and a nation" that is more or less subjected to forgetfulness in diaspora (Habib, 2013, p.72). And because Darwish is counted as the mouthpiece of Palestinians in exile, he attains a higher place in the collective memory not only of the Palestinians but also of Arabs in diaspora; he is the Arabs' homeland where the diasporic predicament turns it into a land roaming the world and offering an intimate shelter to those who are dispossessed around the world. He is "a perfect country/ moving through the world" ("Endure"). The value ascribed to a poet like Darwish is an expression of a wish to continue to exist and to affirm in that existence an identity that defies erasure. This wish is anchored to a homeland icon as momentous as Darwish.

---

<sup>115</sup> Hereafter "Endure".

In an analogous manner, the speaker of “ASCENSION” (Abinader, 2014, p. 32)<sup>116</sup>, also recalls Darwish to revive her lost sense of belonging. Her anxious realization that her existence outside her homeland is aimless, like many others who “do but continue to walk/ in countries where they were not born” (“ASCENSION”), can only be resolved by the poet whose poetry concretizes an identity that is about to disintegrate in the diaspora. His poetic “voices” recall that identity, and his poetic “refrain” structures and solidifies it:

Mahmud, it is too much to hold

I stand in the square and call for you

You pierce the voices of this city—

the sky over Ramallah is refrain (“ASCENSION”)

There is indeed much drama in the poem. It is evidenced in the evocation of the poet Mahmud Darwish, in the loneliness of the fatigued speaker, and in the sky over Ramallah, a Palestinian city that endures occupation and political restlessness. In the speaker’s reaching out to Darwish, the poet, and to his poetry about enduring Palestinian cities, lies a belief that such homeland symbols help an identity which is adrift to settle itself. If settled, this restless identity can ascend to a better state of being, hence the poem’s title.

### **Food to Fight Forgetfulness**

When Terry Eagleton suggests that “if there is one sure thing about food, it is not just food” (cited in Gibson, 2009, p.66), it is because he knows that people’s own food, food habits, and cuisine are “key cultural signs that structure people’s identities” (Xu, 2008, p. 2). Additionally, upholding our ethnic food behavior or habits is a form of peaceful resistance to the threat of identity erasure. Koc and Welsh (2001) define food choice as “cultural expression and practice,” something “central to our sense of identity” (p. 47). Furthermore,

---

<sup>116</sup> Hereafter “ASCENSION”.

preserving our ethnic cuisine and food culture substantiate our life outside the homeland in the sense that they render us distinct from outsiders and at the same time unified within our own ethnic group. Like the places and people of homeland, food and gustatory imagery also function as ethnicity anchors or “cushions from displacement and homelessness” that help to transport us “to the ever-elusive home” (Xu, 2008, p. 104). It is one form of home-building (Barnier, 2010; Gibson, 2009) that shelters our feelings, and is a source of ethnic pride even when this pride is experienced within the ethnic group of which one is a member.

My own cultural origins are Syrian. As a people, Syrians take pride in their culinary tradition. I can say that food plays a big role in the formation of our identity in a positive way. Many Syrians displaced around the world have established their names in the food making industry in the many countries in which they have sought refuge not only in the nearby bordering countries like Turkey, but also “in Europe, even countries like Denmark, with its strict anti-immigration laws and unwelcoming policies, is enjoying the influential food customs of its latest arrivals” (Varzi, 2016, no page) although this is a consequence of the misery of the 2011 war in Syria. Individual stories of the success of Syrian refugees as food-makers are in international news. Malakeh Jazmati, and Razan Alsous, both refugee Syrian chefs, are now food celebrities. While Jazmati is called the chef who dazzled the German chancellor Merkel in the kitchen (*Mail Online*, 2017), Alsous, according to a CNN reporter, is the Syrian chef who has made “an award winning U.K. business” (Kirby, 2017). The intimate relationship between Syrians and their cuisine, and the high value they ascribe to food, can be observed in the endearing names Syrians give to their traditional dishes. “Basha (king) and his soldiers,” “The sheikh of rice-stuffed vegetables,” “David, the Basha,” “*Aisha Khanoum* (Madam Aisha),” and “Coquettish father”, are some examples of names of traditional Syrian dishes. As well as showing the high position food occupies in Syrian culture, these names suggest power and domination. Pride in their traditional dishes allows

Syrians to perceive themselves as masters of cooking, a positive feeling that sustains them and uplifts their spirits. Like any other people, if Syrians are forced to live away from their homeland, food is their home and haven.

Halaby's and Nye's speakers' approach to homeland food imagery parallels these speakers' adjustment strategy. That is to say, Halaby's antagonistic speakers recall homeland gustatory images in an aggressive manner which denotes emotional pain. Imagery such as that recalled by Halaby's speakers emphasize a cultural force that continues to differentiate homeland from the "dwelling place"<sup>117</sup> (Koc and Welsh, 2001) in a sense that maintains the gap between them. Nye's associate-dissociate speakers however, find in homeland food images which are neutral and express a passion the speakers hold towards homeland without being antagonistic to the context of diaspora a speaker is destined to be in. For Nye's speakers, homeland food imagery is there to boost spirit and heal emotional pain whether the speaker expresses that pain or not.

An example of aggressive gastronomical images of homeland food is found in Halaby's poem "journey". These images are urged by the speaker's feeling of extreme estrangement in America after being bullied at school. Her feeling of foreignness creates an aura of darkness that intimidates her, "born/ out of place/ [...]/ blanketed in foreignness" ("journey"). Intimidated by her feeling of being isolated, she pulls out from her lexicon words that are imbued with violence: she "spat all America out" ("journey") to "chop" out her American friends "Sara," "Shawna," and "Nina," ("journey") to add in instead Arab friends "Jommana," "Rula," and "Hania" ("journey"). To further avenge herself, she travels to her homeland and returns after she "[...] vomited labels/ [...]/ devoured rich and fatty stories/ [...]/ suitcases heavy with zaatar and coffee" and "returned to the States" ("journey"). The

---

<sup>117</sup> Proctor (2003).



speaker's choice of words like "spit", "chop", "vomit", and "devour" is like a coded message that tells about her vindictive reaction resulting from her thought that she is "born/out of place" and in the darkness of "foreignness". What she wants to spit is America the country she was born in. And what she wishes to chop and vomit are her American friends and American culture respectively. These violent choices evoke gluttonous, if not also cannibalistic, gastronomical images. This speaker's sense of alienation in America turns her into a misanthropist. Worse still is her growing sense of estrangement where even her own ethnic food which she has brought with her from her homeland to let herself feel Arab enough does not help. Her "suitcases heavy with zaatar and coffee" or ethnic food she brought to "devour" in America, "did not make me an Arab", says the misanthropist speaker ("journey"). Even though she resorts to her homeland food to cushion her troubled feelings, the stress this speaker feels in her "dwelling place"<sup>118</sup> is stronger than her nostalgia over Arab food. In her diaspora she is disempowered and nothing can help her feel home.

The emotional power and the nostalgic feeling associated with homeland food and habits can also be seen in the poem entitled "eid" (Halaby, p. 73-74)<sup>119</sup>. When in the *eid* <sup>120</sup> celebration an Arab American family serves "kifta/ [and] rice", or homeland food to the speaker, the emotional effect these produce is climactic, even diabolic:

unleash the *ghurba*  
 I feel it rising, large and fierce,  
 filling me with an evil mood  
 a deep sadness ("eid")

---

<sup>118</sup> Proctor (2003).

<sup>119</sup> Hereafter "eid".

<sup>120</sup> In Arabic, the word *eid* denotes celebration.

Opposite to what is expected in a similar situation where the sight and the smell of homeland food awaken positive memory and warm feelings (Xu, 2015), what is awakened or “unleash[ed]” in the lines above is an ugly thing. It is the speaker’s hidden hideous ogre; her “*ghurba*”. Her diasporic state is loathsome to her. It is a metaphor for an act of sorcery that has suppressed her feelings until these feelings turned into an ugly and evil creature. Like the speaker of “journey” above, this speaker’s sense of security is threatened. The use of the word “*ghurba*” in Arabic is to recall the evil connotation this word has in Arabic culture. Once this ominous Arabic word is used, darkness prevails.

Confiscating homeland food in an American airport is seen as a racist act that endangers one’s existence and threatens one’s identity. This is how the speaker of Halaby’s “a warning to All Arabs traveling back to the United States: TSA<sup>121</sup> officials are now employing Israeli security tactics at the Newark airport” (Halaby, 2012, pp.117-119)<sup>122</sup> feels when she learns about TSA’s new security measures at American airports. A confiscated “suitcase/ intended to stave off/ homesickness/ for another year” (“a warning”) is not merely a “suitcase” but is a symbol of home that travels with people to ensure their safety and cure their homesickness. For this speaker, her homeland food is a conduit to a warmer life in diaspora as they “make coming back tolerable” (“a warning”). That is why she has:

packed as much  
of home as  
[...]  
could fit  
one suitcase stuffed with spices  
dried cheeses

---

<sup>121</sup> Transportation Security Administration.

<sup>122</sup> Hereafter “a warning”.

coffees

teas

homemade

sweets

[...]

[...] dried *mlukhiyya* leaves

[...]

two plastic bags

filled with zaatar (“a warning”)

The “spices”, “dried cheese”, “coffees”, “sweets”, “*mlukhiyya*”, and “zaatar” are all symbolic of her homeland and in carrying them with her to her American “dwelling place”<sup>123</sup> she creates for herself a conduit which enables her to make a spiritually uplifting pilgrimage to this land whenever she feels alienated or homesick. However, when her symbolic food is trashed in a dumpster by TSA, the speaker is not only offended, but she sees this as an act of occupation that threatens her. Her sense of estrangement in the “dwelling place”<sup>124</sup> is intensified; with a homeland left behind, and with homeland symbols trashed, she becomes doubly “homeless” (“a warning”). Confiscation becomes traumatizing. That is because these symbols function as the speaker’s refuge, and when none of these symbols remains, not even “zaatar to dive into,” her sense of *ghurba* deepens, and like the speaker of “eid”, she gets nervous. She begins to hear imaginary whispers, “there is no longer/ home”, (“a warning”) that could indicate her inner feeling of insecurity, of being dispossessed and rejected. Symbolically speaking, the TSA has demolished the speaker’s imaginary home that is built from the symbolic homeland food and left her homeless.

---

<sup>123</sup> Proctor (2003).

<sup>124</sup> *ibid.*

For Nye's Arab American speaker, homeland food is an enduringly peaceful symbol of the land of origin and one that attenuates loneliness in the diaspora. In this biographical prose poem "Wavelength" (Nye, 2011, p. 115-119)<sup>125</sup>, the Arab American father who "wrote an endearing cookbook, *A Taste of Palestine*" to downplay any possible negative effect of diaspora and to retain imaginary ties with his homeland Palestine, dies and leaves his legacy, "My legacy. His last word. Parsley" ("Wavelength"). There is indeed a strong sense of nostalgia not only in the title of the book, but also in attaching to food the spiritual power of a dying person's last words.

If in real life Palestine is gone leaving behind sorrow and pain, *A Taste of Palestine* recreates this homeland through its cuisine and tasty food which this father labels as "[s]taff of life" ("Wavelength"). "Parsley", the will left by this speaker, functions as an anti-erasure panacea as it spiritually anchors both the memory of homeland and that of the father to life.

In yet another poem, "My Father and the Figtree" (Nye, 2002, p. 6-7)<sup>126</sup>, an Arab American daughter tells the reader that homeland food has always been present in her father's stories, in their bedtime stories, in Joha's tales and in other Arab folktales that the father narrates to his children. Knowing that Joha is a famous trickster who is considered as a "representative of the 'spirit' of Arab folk culture" (El-Shamy, 1976) explains why the father of Arab descent narrates Joha's tales to his American-born daughters. It is the father's way of remembering homeland and of connecting his children to that land in order to "boost their self-awareness of their literature" (Honko, 1995). Both Joha, the traditional figure, and homeland food, facilitate the Arab American father's story, and together, they let the children connect with their homeland Palestine:

For other fruits my father was indifferent.

---

<sup>125</sup> Hereafter "Wavelength".

<sup>126</sup> Hereafter "Figtree".

He'd point at the cherry trees and say,  
"See those? I wish they were figs."  
In the evenings he sat by our beds  
weaving folktales like vivid little scarves.  
They always involved a figtree.  
Even when it didn't fit, he'd stick it in.  
Once Joha was walking down the road  
and he saw a figtree.  
Or, he tied his camel to a figtree and went to sleep.  
Or later, when they caught and arrested him,  
his pockets were full of figs ("Figtree")

Figs and the fig tree are central to the fairytale-like atmosphere of the lines above. The reality of the fig, and the fantasy Joha's presence adds to the bedtime stories, invoke a perfect nostalgic homely atmosphere in this family's "dwelling place"<sup>127</sup>. Additionally, the repetitive deployment of the same symbol, fig, is meant to embed this fruit in the minds of his uprooted Arab American children. In fact, fig and olive are emblematic of Palestine and its proximity to Mount Sinai. An entire verse in The Quran is entitled "The Verse of Fig" (The Quran, 95) and it makes reference to "Mount Sinai" as a blessed mountain. The religious identity of the fig turns it into a powerful twofold symbol. That is to say, it is both nostalgic and religious and hence its persistent presence in the stories and the fantasy of the Arab American father who would sing "a figtree song" ("Figtree") and put this symbol everywhere even in Joha's pocket. Eventually, one can say that this father's bedtime stories are not mere stories; they are acts of home-building, a home he is building not only for himself but also for his children.

---

<sup>127</sup> Proctor (2003).

They are, additionally, cultural anchors that help his Arab American little children, born and raised in America, create bonds, even if imaginary, with their homeland.

When peace is unattainable, food is a surrogate, a shelter, and is home enough by itself. Abu Mahmoud the Palestinian farmer of the occupied lands across whose “valley the military/ settlement gleamed white” recognizes the healing power of homeland food when home is gone. Central to the poem “The Garden of Abu Mahmoud” (Nye, 2002, pp. 20-21)<sup>128</sup> is this man’s metaphorical, or rather, ritualistic relationship with his own garden; his lost homeland’s surrogate. His morning begins with a metaphorical handshake that is “dug [...] into earth” to say hi, “*I know you*” to his own garden (“Abu Mahmoud”). “*I know you*” is to simultaneously confirm and affirm an established bond between Abu Mahmoud as a citizen of the land and the land itself. The act of speaking to earth, to the garden, and to its crops later in the poem is an act that fosters intimacy and warmth, a homely practice that expresses Abu Mahmoud’s urgent need only to feel a citizen of a land, but also to emotionally feel at home. The metaphor extends itself when we learn that a love story takes place in Abu Mahmoud’s homeland’s surrogate. The man is indeed in love with his “darling tomato”, an offspring of the homeland surrogate, only the use of his vernacular “*ya habibi*” quenches that love:

[...] He called it  
*ya habibi* in Arabic, my darling tomato,  
and it called him governor, king,  
and some days he wore no shoes (“Abu Mahmoud”)

Using the vernacular makes the atmosphere warmer; it creates a sense of intimacy and immediacy that prevails over the chilly atmosphere of exile or diaspora. It is reciprocal,

---

<sup>128</sup> Hereafter “Abu Mahmoud”.

however, and when Abu Mahmoud calls his tomato “*ya habibi*” it calls him “governor, king” indifferent to this king’s status as a dispossessed person. “Abu Mahmoud” is a manifestation of how through their “sub-symbolic meaningful qualities,” homeland tokens, “are often most appropriate in facilitating the voyage to this imaginary space of feelings” (Barnier, 2010, p. 422) where ownership, citizenship, and even courtship are possible in an imaginary land that functions as homeland.

### **Conclusion**

My examination of the experience of diaspora by the different Arab American speakers in the poetry of Mohja Kahf, Laila Halaby, Elmaz Abinader, and Naomi Nye has shown it to be a very diverse phenomenon. The analysis has suggested that in spite of the fact that these poets are from similar cultural background, each one of them has created speakers who react in different ways to their diasporic status, to patterns of racism, and to their life in the “dwelling place”<sup>129</sup>. Even the etymological analysis through which I bound the word *ghourba*, diaspora’s Arabic counterpart, with an inherent feeling of passivity and sadness proves this bond to be dissolvable. Kahf’s and Nye’s Arab American speakers have demonstrated examples of cheerful adaptation to the “dwelling place”<sup>130</sup> as well as maintaining the best possible attachment to, and interest in, their land of origin. The passivity and aggression demonstrated respectively by Abinader’s and Halaby’s speakers, though darker in nature, are adjustment strategies that help the different speakers to overcome their diasporic status or avoid racial bullying.

No matter what pattern of adjustment each speaker deploys and what feeling they have toward their diasporic state, two facts can be asserted about all the speakers: they all

---

<sup>129</sup> Proctor (2003).

<sup>130</sup> *ibid.*

become constant dwellers of their “dwelling place”<sup>131</sup> in the United States, and they all cherish their homeland memory. A manifestation of this nostalgia towards their roots is found in different contexts where homeland symbols are retrieved to empower the speakers. In many of the poems that are investigated in this chapter, homeland people, places, and cuisines are recalled to add a touch of warmth and a flavor of intimacy to the sometime chilly “dwelling place”<sup>132</sup>. Even when these symbols are confiscated, their mere presence in the speakers’ imagination is clue enough that the speakers attach value, even if only symbolically, to their homeland.

---

<sup>131</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>132</sup> *ibid.*



## Chapter Three

### Poetry and the Expression of War and Trauma

“We are waiting, what do we do in the face

Of these bombings?”

(“THIS HOUSE, MY BONES”, Abinader, 2014, p. 38)

#### Introduction

Informed by trauma theory, this chapter contends that once any form of conflict takes place, its devastating consequences tear people down and may even haunt them long after the conflict is resolved. Fear, hallucinations, psychological hunger, humiliation, and rage are examples of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorders (PTSDs) (Meisenhelder and Marcum, 2009) that are experienced by people after exposure to stressful situations and are addressed in this chapter. As will the chapter reveal, adaptation to a PTSD requires the employment of variable coping strategies. Strategies like spiritual rituals, positive remembrances, resorting to art, hope, and even amnesia are among those deployed by the speakers of Abinader, Kahf, Halaby, and Nye who survive war and conflict. The various voices this chapter examines emphasize that the atrocities of war and conflict challenge every survivor. Grandparents, parents, and younger people are all subject to such atrocities, their varied feelings and responses are captured and examined here.

I use the word *war* throughout the chapter to refer to conflict between two opposing powers whether the conflict is armed or not. Additionally, I treat the words —*war* and *conflict* as interchangeable. Although war refers to a conflict that is larger in nature and more serious than a conflict, both have traumatic effects on human beings who are the focus of analysis in this chapter. The section War Poetry and the Crisis of Iraq will show that the US-led War on Iraq in 2003 is no less devastating to the Iraqis than the prolonged Palestinian-Israeli conflict to the Palestinians or the Israelis. Additionally, although the Al-Qaeda’s 9/11 terrorist attacks are not called *war*, yet the damage that the Al-Qaeda terrorist organization

did to humanity<sup>133</sup> on that date is comparable to the damage it caused to the people of the United States. The 19 hijackers, all of whom were Arabs and Muslims, put the Arab and the Muslim worlds in serious confrontation with the United States and the West, a confrontation that made Islamophobia one of the most persisting forms of xenophobia. As the discussion will show, the 9/11 attacks have brought about misery to the lives of Arabs, Muslims, and Middle-Easterners alike whether they reside in the United States or abroad as it charged the atmosphere with hatred.

As this chapter concerns itself with the study of war poetry, its primary focus will be on imagery and the literary analysis of wars and conflicts that provide a setting for the poems examined under the theme of war. These are the *Safar Barlik* (1912),<sup>134</sup> the First World War (1914–1918), the Spanish (1936–1939) and Lebanese (1975–1990) Civil Wars, the 9/11 attacks (2001), and the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq. After a brief review of trauma theory, the chapter scrutinizes the poets' portrayal of war scenes to address questions such as How central are mothers to war scenes and how do they react to war and its separation trauma? Do survivors of war vary in their responses during and after the traumatic situation? What other patterns of survival, or coping strategies, do other survivors of war and conflicts use to overcome their stress? Why do USA-led conflicts in the Arab world, particularly America's invasion of Iraq in 2003, occupy more space in war poetry than any other conflict? To what

---

<sup>133</sup> From more than 100 000 to 250 000 Iraqi deaths per year, it is fair to compare the terror of the US-led invasion of Iraq to the terrorist attacks of 9/11 that took the life of more than 2000 people ("Iraq's body count", 2006; Zeger, 2007).

<sup>134</sup> While the process of writing this thesis was undergoing, waves of revolutions flooded Tunisia (2010), Egypt (2011), Libya (2011), Yemen (2011), and Syria (2011). In many cases, these revolutions wrought bloody havoc and caused prolonged wars and humanitarian crises particularly in Syria and Yemen. However, I choose to begin from the *Safar Barlik* (1912), but not earlier, and stop at the Fall of Baghdad (2003), but no later, because the settings of the war-poems discussed here do not go to earlier than 1912 or to further than 2003.

extent do the poets' Arab American status affect their perception of, and reaction to, fights in the Arab world, particularly the ones led by the USA?

### **From the *Safar Barlik* (1912) to the US-led War on Iraq (2003): Ceaseless Traumas**

Mothers and fathers who survive war and its traumatic experiences are given a special space in this chapter. The parental voice sheds light on wars that are part of the old history of the Arab world. Among these wars is the *Safar Barlik* (1912) or the journey over land, during which the Ottomans conscripted young men from Greater Syria (now Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Jordan) to fight for the Turkish army in the First World War (1914–1918). In many cases during conscription, a lottery system was used to choose who among the young men should be forced into the Turkish army. For the parents of those young men, this process was a gamble that put the lives of dear ones at stake, traumatized the parents, and forced them to respond in panic. During the *Safar Barlik* (1912) and before the chosen sons were recruited by the Ottoman army, their families would smuggle them out “in prepared hiding places in the houses, in the fields, in caves, with Bedouin families or in other out-of-the-way places as soon as the recruiting commissions approached” (Hanna, 2010, p. 304). This process is captured in many poems herein discussed where mothers, traumatized by separation, narrate their stories of bitter survival after this lottery has sentenced their dear ones to death when the “word came” (“The Skaff Mother Tells the Story”, Kahf, 2003, pp. 2-3)<sup>135</sup> from the Ottoman army and their boys/men were chosen to fight in the deadly war. What these mothers do in the poetry of war that is studied here is to reincarnate the stressful images of pain, loss, and death and yet despite their stress, they continue to cling to hope. Deluded, Sitti, who is a main speaker in many poems by Abinader, relentlessly prays to God to return her deceased husband from the dead and reunite her with him. The fact that the husband has disappeared decades ago into the mist of war is weaker than her religious rituals that try to resurrect him.

---

<sup>135</sup> Hereafter “Skaff Mother”.

Similarly, the father in Naomi Nye's poetry is relentlessly obsessed with the ongoing Palestinian-Israeli conflict which separated Palestine into two states: Arab and Jewish, after two phases of war between Palestinian Arabs backed by surrounding Arab countries, and Israel in 1948 (Harms and Ferry, 2008). However, the longevity of the conflict, as the poems will show later, does not surrender the father to hopelessness or inactivity. From his exile in the United States, he perseveres and narrates the story of his land and expresses wishes that one day both Palestinians and Israelis will enjoy coexistence.

The post-war existence of the parents of war is made unbearable by loss and pain, but there is still strength in the voices of these parents who resist, pray, cope, and survive. The survival practices of the parents are superseded by constant fear and anger by the younger speakers in spite of the fact that this younger generation learns about war through news yet has never set foot in war-stricken areas. The shadow of the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990) still haunts Elmaz Abinader's young Lebanese-American speaker whose love is stigmatized by the memory of what this war has left behind. Although this speaker is not even an eyewitness of this war, it is enough for her American lover to watch news about militias fighting in Lebanon to become suspicious of his Lebanese-American beloved. As the later discussion will show what the Civil War in Lebanon (1975–1990) left behind negatively influences younger Lebanese in their distant dwelling homes in the United States. According to Norman Nikro (2012), although the Civil War in Lebanon (1975–1990) is long gone, its impact has barely faded from the Lebanese soil or from the hearts of the Lebanese people. A civil war that has taken the life of 200,000 people, displaced one million others, and left thousands of others psychologically or physically traumatized across generations.

One cannot avoid the tension a topic like war may create in such a context where the United States, the poets' "dwelling place"<sup>136</sup>, is behind the curtain of wars that are still affecting the Arab world, the poets' area of origin, and are captured in the poems this chapter scrutinizes. Basically, it is the 9/11 attacks and the US-led War on Iraq (2003) that occupy the main place in war poetry by the four poets I have chosen to study. However, in most cases, these are captured only from the view point of an Arab American, or an Arab, who is psychologically or physically injured by the attacks or the war. An Americanized version of the story is marginalized if ever it is present. For example, Laila Halaby's Arab American speaker is made the sole victim of the 9/11 attacks, and so is the case with Naomi Nye whose speaker completely avoids any mention of the tragedy that befell thousands of innocent Americans after the attacks. In Nye's poem entitled "Interview: Saudi Arabia" (2005, p. 65)<sup>137</sup>, for example, readers' sympathies are directed towards the surviving families of the 19 hijackers but not to the American 9/11 victims or their families that faced one of the most devastating damages of the modern world. Discussion of reasons for this sidelined perspective and reaction is part of the later analysis of the poems.

The poets largely elect to speak in female voices. As the discussion shows later, had it not been for Naomi Nye's father who is the main speaker in Nye's war poetry, it would be right to say that men do not exist in the poets' world of war. A spontaneous interpretation for the prevalence of the voice of women in the violent contexts of warfare and conflict could be the poets' partiality towards their own sex. Another more substantial interpretation is that through their poetry, these women poets offer their women speakers a stage upon which to articulate their pain when the atrocities of war silence all voices but not those of violence and guns. It should be stated here, however, that in their portrayal of women in warfare or conflict

---

<sup>136</sup> Proctor (2003).

<sup>137</sup> Hereafter "Saudi Arabia".

contexts, the four Arab American poets studied in this thesis converge in assigning to their women speakers the traditional and archaic role of non-combatants who have no place in the military sphere (Rimalt 2007; Peach 2001). Even in the Hollywood film industry, and despite “cultural forces” that call for ending man’s domination over combatant roles in films, “[p]roductions with mass public appeal follow the portrayal of women [...] as nurses, traditional motherly caretakers, not as combat veterans” (Ritzenhoff and Kazecki 2014, p. 4). In fact, there seems to be a persistent consensus (not without foundation) that during wars or violent conflicts, women are left behind to experience the variable tragedies of war that result in death, widowhood, displacement, hunger, rape, shouldering “all the sorrow of war” yet “none of its glory” (Shirazi, 2010, p. 13). However, while it could be said that experiencing and then enduring these post-war atrocities is a heroic deed and a “glory” in itself, it is not unlikely that the multiple griefs of women are forgotten even by women writers themselves (Shirazi, 2010). The poetry of war which is studied here, helps to highlight the often-forgotten role women play in conflict zones.

### **Trauma at a Glance: From Sigmund Freud’s “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” (1920) to the Present**

The Austrian neurologist Sigmund Freud believed that any “unpleasurable experience,” any “conflict and dissensions,” or any “accident involving a risk to life” causes a “traumatic neurosis” (Freud, 1920). While Freud’s is a broad definition of trauma that involves “any” unfortunate experience, the American Psychological Association stresses the “terrible” element in the experience and defines trauma as “an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape or natural disaster” (APA, 2014). More specifically, Claire Stocks (2007) in her article “Trauma Theory and the Singular Self,” explains that it is war and its scenes that have contributed to advancing the research into trauma theory particularly after the fall of the Vietnamese city of Saigon in 1973 which accelerated research and provided a

“substantial body of theoretical and literary work” on the phenomenon of trauma (Stocks, 2007, p. 1).

The discussion of trauma usually includes the discussion of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and the use of transformational objects along with coping strategies. PTSD “describes a wide range of responses to trauma” that occur in “victims of human aggression, such as prisoners of war or victims of physical assaults, with symptoms lasting for months to years” (Meisenhelder and Marcum, 2009, p. 47) and include as common manifestations: re-experiencing,<sup>138</sup> hyperarousal,<sup>139</sup> avoidance,<sup>140</sup> and numbness.<sup>141</sup> In some cases, and in order not to be overwhelmed by the situation, survivors of trauma employ transformational objects to help them contain any PTSD they may experience (Schwab, 2009). These objects that Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok (1995 as cited in Stocks, 2007) call “introjections”, allow trauma survivors to transform their pain into something external and to eventually deal with loss in a healthier way (Schwab, 2009). Writing is one widely-known and well documented transformational object that can help those affected to recover and grow following a tragic experience like war. “Through writing” trauma is “transformed into a source of learning” and changes the victim’s life (Bracegirdle, 2011, p. 79). Sometimes, “just giving pain a name can relieve and transform it” (Allen, 2005, p. 5). This chapter defines coping strategies as a means by which trauma survivors employ one or more transformational

---

<sup>138</sup> Also called “haunting” by Cho (2008, p. 6) in *Haunting the Korean Diaspora*, when re-experiencing takes place the past intrudes into the present and creates a sense of anxiety and distress.

<sup>139</sup> According to Allen (2005), hyperarousal includes sleep disturbance, anger, lack of concentration, and “exaggerated startle response” (p. 177).

<sup>140</sup> Avoiding remembrances of a forgone tragedy might heal trauma, yet it makes the life of the traumatized “increasingly limited and constricted” (Allen, 2005, p. 178).

<sup>141</sup> Deliberate deadening of emotional responses (Allen, 2005).

object. Meisenhelder JP and Marcum JB (2009) list healthy relationships with people and with a higher power in the aftermath of trauma as examples of positive coping strategies. However, the expression of confusion and anger towards that higher power are examples of negative coping strategies (Meisenhelder and Marcum, 2009). Be they positive or negative, the fact remains that these strategies help trauma victims vent their pain and survive, albeit with a varying degree of emotional growth.

Although the fall of Saigon ushers in the ensuing debate of trauma theory, literature has manifested an independent interest in the portrayal of trauma. To list but a few examples, one can quote Jane's traumatic experience when she sees a ghost in the red room in *Jane Eyre* (Brontë, 1847). This terrifying experience grows with Jane who loses consciousness whenever she remembers her enforced isolation in the red room (Morris, 2013). Although neither Jane nor Charlotte Brontë give a name to Jane's disorder resulting from the latter's troubled memory, trauma theory today considers Jane a victim of PTSD. Similarly, the recurrent encounter with ghosts experienced by characters in the horror stories of Edgar Allan Poe is another example of PTSD. Even though the loss of Ligeia is not explicitly described as a disorder resulting from separation trauma, the hallucinations the husband goes through after Ligeia's death are in fact a manifestation of a PTSD which culminates in his seeing his deceased wife in the body of his now dying new wife (Poe, "Ligeia", p. 1838). Additionally, survivors of the Holocaust, particularly female survivors, shared their tragic experiences with the world long before the fall of Saigon. Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl* was published in 1947 to tell the story of a girl's suffering, and that of other Jews, during the Nazi's occupation of Holland. The writer Charlotte Delbo provides another female perspective on the horror of the Holocaust. Her book *Auschwitz and After* though published in 1984, retrospectively tells the story of the Jews at the hands of the Nazis (1941-1945) (Stewart, 2003).



The examples above from Brontë, Poe, Frank, and Delbo's testify that when writers rely on their senses their art can compassionately convey the atrocities, or "the horror, the pity, the ghastliness when human bodies are subjected to violence of any kind" (Daniels, 1993, p. 115). Informed by trauma theory, and where warfare and violent experiences are in the background, this chapter intends to analyze these traumatic and post-traumatic atrocities as manifested in the poetry of the four Arab American who are the focus of this thesis. I do this through shifting lenses from battlefields to zoom in on the lives of ordinary people who have survived trauma but who have gone unnoticed. I provide evidence of Daniels' (1993) contention that a writer not practised in the scientific field of trauma, but yet has mastered her/his senses, can produce "reflection of trauma" through "metaphors and symbols" (Bracegirdle, 2011, p. 83).

### **The Poetry of War**

#### **Mothers and the Grandmothers Excavating their War Memories**

I listen to the women left behind to war

rummage through memory. They become the hunters

and gatherers, walking through streets

where earth has burst to the surface,

defending itself from assaults of fire. ("Pleasure is Freedom-song"<sup>142</sup>, Abinader, 1999, pp. 24-25)

"[M]emory". In the shadow of war, it is this faculty of human beings that matters the most because it functions as a repository of the past, including that part which is plagued by war. As carrier of this now war-plagued faculty, those "who've been traumatized" states Allen (2005, p. 4), may experience "distressing memories, flashbacks, and nightmares; they may continue to struggle with powerful emotions they experienced at the time of the trauma; and

---

<sup>142</sup> Hereafter "Freedom-song".

they may continue using the same self-protective means that they initially learned to shield themselves” (Allen, 2005, p. 4). Matsuda (2012) also comments on the role memory plays in shaping the life of the traumatized in the aftermath of crises. According to him, “[e]very crisis generates not only its own misery, but its own historical memory. Many of those memories come from conflicts, some forgotten or erased, but also relentlessly remembered by survivors” (Matsuda, 2012, p. 336). To capture the burden of carrying a memory that is sabotaged by war, the speaker of this poem draws an exhausting, ghost-like analogy that compares the mothers “left behind to war” to “hunters/ and gatherers” who “walk through streets” to “rummage through memory”. They are lonely, “left behind” to become heirs of a fearful, bloody place, “earth” and “streets” that are obliterated by war. And their “rummage” becomes psychologically exhausting because what they are hunting or searching for are valuable meanings in “women[‘s]” obliterated post-war “memor[ies]”. The portrayal of these women in such a way leaves an overall impression of them as lost roamers whose task is as chaotic and visceral as that war which “left” them behind. The ability of these fragile women to move on and to look for meaning in life amid such a miserable situation deserves admiration however. They do not surrender but go on searching for the remains of yesterday. And though what they are doing might be pointless, they are moving through their hellish war-torn places. They stand out as “iconic representatives of [...] interiority” (Gardiner and Garner, 2010, p. 189), and integrity, like many other women or mothers of war and realize that they have no other choice but to swallow their pain in order to survive and find meaning in the chaotic scenes of war.

Abinader’s Sitti is another mother, or rather grandmother, who stubbornly survives war and endures her war-troubled memory. Her tongue is ever furnished with sincere prayers for family reunification. Sitti cries to Jesus, or to “Yasu”, to reunite her with her husband from whom she was separated decades ago after he has been killed during the war: “*send me/*

*to him, Jesus; send him to me*” (“Burning Bush”, Abinader, 1999, pp. 21-22)<sup>143</sup>, Sitti prays. Though deluded due to its post-war and post-separation state, Sitti’s mind still nurtures the memory of the deceased husband, and these memories spark her actions of, jumping and “slid[ing] bread through the grate/ to feed him” (“Burning Bush”). Through this, and through her prayers, Sitti sustains herself spiritually and physically. In “Burning Bush”, Sitti performs rites which strengthen her inwardly. In their research about the role prayers play in facilitating post-traumatic growth (PTG), both Haris *et al.* (2012) and Krause (2009) show that connecting with a higher power contributes to healing the traumatized. Sitti’s habitual employment of these rituals tell about a strong-willed woman who, in spite of her emotional pain and obvious mental delusions, does not surrender herself to the consequences of war.

As Sitti survives the trauma through her symbolic rituals, she also realizes that she is now an entire family in one person. Under the curtains of night, Sitti peeps into darkness, and crawls “behind the lines of Turkish soldiers/ flour and rice hanging in bags in the cave/ of her arms pits (“Freedom-song”). As she endures her circumstances, Sitti also becomes a symbol of self-sacrifice. Her “arms pits” turn into life providers. Although the situation is terrifying, Sitti understands that another death, caused now by starvation, is not a choice even if this means her own death. Like many women who are stricken by war:

[w]hen their husbands, sons, families, and community members are targeted, kidnapped, imprisoned, tortured, or killed, women are not only overcome by grief and fear, they must pick up the pieces, be strong for children and other dependents, and ensure the family’s survival. And this is often required under conditions of extreme hardship, where basic infrastructure and services, food, water, and healthcare, become

---

<sup>143</sup> Hereafter “Burning Bush”.

scarce to nil. Often, war forces communities to flee, adding the burden of loss of home, loss of memories, and loss of cherished items. (Imam, 2010, p. 117)

It should be noted however that Sitti does not offer herself as a naive prey either to her apocalyptic circumstances, nor to the fires of the “Turkish soldiers” (“Freedom-song”). She takes self-protective measures and silently crawls under the blind eyes of night to find food for the remaining members of her family to whom she returns safely. The mental image for the reader of Sitti crawling silently at night during war and with “flour and rice hanging in bags in the cave/ of her arm pits” (“Freedom-song”) to provide for her family could be associated with images of a loyal fighter who crawls under barbed wires to assault the enemy and secure the front lines of her/his own country. Sitti’s is no less a heroic deed than that of the soldiers in battlefields; she is also protecting a frontline of society: family.

“HEARTWOOD” (Abinader, 2014, p. 16-17)<sup>144</sup> is a symbolic reading of the role the mothers and grandmothers play in keeping the family together and strong during and after war trauma. As in “Freedom-song”, in “HEARTWOOD” (Abinader, 2014, p. 16), the speaker draws a heroic soldier-like image of these grandmothers, or mothers, suffering the barbed wires’ “pinch” and “scars”, while also exposing themselves to danger to provide for their loved ones. But in “Heartwood” the speaker uses the family tree analogy to compare the family to a tree where the enduring sugar-full “heartwood” is a symbol for these generous and heroic mothers and grandmothers, and where the softer “sapwood” stands for their loved ones for whom they endanger themselves:

What is seen are grandmothers

skimming barbed-wire

stuffing groceries under their skirts

scrambling over the gate

---

<sup>144</sup> Hereafter “HEARTWOOD”.

[...]

The pinch of the wire just refreshes old scars

they do not think as much of it as you do when

your organs soak with sugars [*sic.*] (“HEARTWOOD”)

A family’s safety and food resources, as Imam (2010) suggests above and as is suggested in “HEARTWOOD”, is a dangerous and an extremely difficult thing to do in war-torn areas, yet it is endured by the “grandmothers” who crawl under “barbed-wire” to smuggle out food for their family members. The hardships and dangers they go through to sustain their families empower these women so they become like the heartwood of trees which “main function [...] is to support the tree” (“HEARTWOOD”). The “sugars” family members “soak” up stand for the substance of life provided by the “grandmothers”.

In her poetry where war and conflict are in the background, Abinader seems to be interested in emphasizing familial ties between the speaker of the poem and the poem’s main characters. The mothers in “Freedom-song” (Abinader, 1999, p. 24) and “Burning Bush” are the speaker’s aunt and grandmother. In highlighting the family role and familial relationships during times of hardship, Abinader means to re-configure the family as a haven, as a provider of physical and psychological support, and as a main source of emotional warmth and unity. Where people affected by war and conflict may have no place to return to, the value of the family and familial ties during turbulent times increases. Additionally, reference to these relationships in the poems strengthens this speaker’s emotion towards the whole scene and creates a sense of intimacy that captures the reader’s attention and evokes his/her emotions.

Azzizy, or rather “aunt Azzizy[’s]” memory is no better than Sitti’s. Unlike Sitti, Azzizy is not an eyewitness of war, yet in her aging memory are remembrances of war and

trauma that are bequeathed to her by her mother whose survival strategy of praying, Azzizy re-employs:

When my Aunt Azzizy stood in her living room  
surrounded by Pictures of Christ, she cried  
out to her dead father. How she missed him  
even at seventy. She looks into his eyes  
as he leaves the village to go to Brazil  
afraid she'll never see him again ("Freedom-song").

"[E]ven at seventy" Azzizy prays to Christ to return her dead father who disappeared "into the mist that hides the Turks" long ago ("Freedom-song"). This dramatic portrayal of "aunt Azzizy" surrounded by the photos of her long-deceased father while praying to Christ to reunite her with him is significant in the sense that it intensifies the emotion of the moment and emphasizes Azzizy's perseverance. We have seen above that survivors of trauma do in many cases resort to praying as a consoling technique. But it is Azzizy's seventy years' stubborn hope that after decades of separation because of war she will be reunited with this father that turns "aunt Azzizy" into a symbol of endurance. In her prayers for familial reunification, Azzizy might be contemplating the hereafter, but even if heaven's answer is deferred for seventy years, the belief that it will happen one day helps the aunt come to terms with her past fears that "she'll never see him again".

From trauma theory perspectives, Azzizy and Sitti develop two selves: an ageing one that experiences the real calamities of war or its consequent trauma, and an ageless self that clings to, and is deluded by, memory of the deceased ones. For their fragmented selves, these memories or nostalgic flashbacks are symptomatic of a PTSD that deepens self-fragmentation and creates fresh pain (Allen, 2005). When memories of their dear ones take hold of reality, both Sitti and Azzizy start to converse with the dead (Stock, 2007). Both Abraham and Torok

(1995 as cited in Stocks, 2007, p. 79) define an “intrapsychic tomb” wherein the traumatized keep their dear ones whose death they still deny (Schwab, 2009). In this tomb lie the bodies of husbands, fathers, and sons of war. It is there that they are reachable through a prayer to Christ, or through unfolding memories, or even through the ritual exchange of bread, as does Sitti above, that have once been shared by family members in their pre-war state. The existence of this intrapsychic tomb, while it heals, also divides the inner self of the traumatized and puts them in a state of continuous anxiety. To resolve this continuous clash between post-war reality and delusional thoughts both Sitti and Azzizy pray to a superpower with an ardent belief that their dismembered families will be reunited.

That “rummage[ing]” (“Freedom-song”) through the memory of war and its painful consequences exhumes another “intrapsychic tomb” where uncles are buried. Recalling the war of the *Safar Barlik* (1912), the face of one of the mothers “left behind to war” (“Freedom-song”):

[...] closes at her as her stories unfold:  
the one of the uncle buried in a cave, his body  
smothered in mountains of chalk and limestones,  
another great uncle hung by his feet  
while soldiers burned what named them-  
photographs, letters, diaries; old books. (“Freedom-song”)

Narrating their stories of pain revives these mothers as much as it allows the speaker, who observes them and is absorbed in their stories, to have her “life [...] filled when hearing them” (“Freedom-song”). Although the images of the uncles’ bodies “smothered in mountains of chalk and limestones,” and “hung by [...] feet” are graphic and recalling them should feel painful (and that is why the mother’s face “closes” as she remembers) this disclosure is needed to let her vent her emotions and survive. This graphic memory also tells

about a strong-willed woman who, in spite of the miseries she has witnessed, is still capable of living.

The image of a mother's womb, this symbolic shelter of life, is also employed in the poem "Freedom-song" to suggest the mother-child trauma of separation and death. Its presence in the story of the women of war accentuates the pain they go through when they "rummage through memory" ("Freedom-song") and heightens the dramatic effect of their story. As the poem continues, one of the mothers "shivers touching her own belly, the womb/ that held children who did not live" when the other was telling stories of the uncles who died in war. Through association, the former mother remembers her own children whom she lost to war and through a symbolic gesture, she puts her hands on her "womb" that carried her now deceased children. In fact, this mother metaphorically relapses into a state of pregnancy and reconnects with an older state of her being, a war-free state that is gone. The tension between this mother's war-stricken and childless reality and her delusional war-free and prosperous state is a manifestation of a post-trauma fragmented self which she shares with Sitti and aunt Azzizy. Their futile wishes or memories only camouflage their realization that in a situation like theirs, survival is not mandatory but is obligatory. They stick to futile hopes to nourish themselves, and they do this in order to "ensure the family's survival" (Imam, 2010, p. 117). The continuity of the family even if the context is impoverished is an uneasy task mothers usually carry out in the dawn of wars (Imam, 2010). Even though war and fighting are traditionally believed to be men's only, the non-combatant women above do also fight on personal and familial fronts and face physical and psychological risks. So, while these women did not go to war, it is a truth that war came to them and never left.



Another maternal character is Mohja Kahf's Syrian Skaff's mother who suffers from war separation trauma and its consequent pain. Haunted by memories<sup>145</sup> surrounding the dangerous smuggling of her young sons out of Syria during the *Safar Barlik* (1912), she tells the reader the disturbing story of her Skaff family. One among hundreds, they barely had time to come to terms with the separation and its consequences before the "word came" ("Skaff Mother"). Fate had chosen the Skaff boys to either die young in a war in which they did not believe in or be sent to the dangerous unknown:

Word came. I had barely time to wrap a bundle  
For them: my mincemeat pies, a scarf of wool.  
Their father gave them golden liras to survive.  
That night, their cousin smuggled them away.  
The *Safar Barlik* had begun- the Balkan War-  
And the Turks were conscripting all our boys.

Wasting their lives. We wanted them to live, our boys ("The Skaff Mother")

"Word came" is so short and simple a statement, yet ironically it is the pre-cursor to a long and stressful situation in the lives of the Skaff family. There has been long fearful process of waiting before one word decided the Skaff boys' destiny: either be conscripted or escape, and there will be an even longer trauma. The decision is made in short order: escape. The "mincemeat pies," and the "scarf of wool" the mother gives to her boys is to let them feel her short-lived motherly care and love, and it translates into her need to continue to nourish them. The "golden liras" of the father are to let his sons understand how they are as precious as gold to him and that smuggling them out is their parents' bitter choice to let the boys survive. However, that the parents sent them away to protect them cannot heal the Skaff mother's

---

<sup>145</sup> This is the Skaff mother's "historical memory" (Matsuda, 2012, p. 336) which is quoted earlier in this chapter in Section "Mothers and Grandmothers Excavating their War Memories" (p. 129).

guilt-feelings initiated by war and its consequent separation trauma. She swears as she recollects the awful memory: “We sent them away, / I swear, to keep them with us; they were only boys./ Fourteen and fifteen is too young to suffer war/ And maybe die.” (“Skaff Mother”). Her unmistakably apologetic tone says a lot about this mother’s continuing fear and guilt-feelings. Time has passed at a snail’s pace as if to let this mother’s separation anxiety strengthen. The line “I’ve spun forty years’ worth since then” is an analogy that compares the mother’s life without her children to a work as tedious and painful as spinning for forty years. This metaphor captures the slow motion, the monotony of time, and the burden of the Skaff mother. In addition to that, forty-year of loneliness dramatically highlight the sudden and speedy nature of the short “word” that “came” and separated the family. Additionally, an analogy can be drawn between the Skaff’s mother’s spinning “[t]he wool of [her] heart [...] after the years and wars,” and a spinner weaving yarns of “wool” together for a final lovely product. The Skaff mother is that spinner, her boys are the yarns, and the tedious task is to thread, or rather bond, the family members together and enjoy an anxiety-free life. The mother’s pain is obvious in her defensive apology, in her meticulous effort to ritually re-unite the family, and in her motherly heart that has become desolate and bare. No matter how desolate this mother sounds, enduring her separation trauma for forty years demonstrates a strong woman who could sustain herself and contain her pain.

For mothers who could not smuggle their loved ones out, the picture is dimmer, and the pain is multifaceted: it is psychological and physical. The poem “Off the Wire” (Abinader, 1999, pp. 32-33)<sup>146</sup> below tells the story of another *Safar Barlik* (1912) victim: a widow left behind with her children. The dull images of the desolate house and the disheveled and fatigued mother are reminiscent of the details of war:

---

<sup>146</sup> Hereafter “Off the Wire”.

waits for the pot  
of brown water to clear. Smoke gathers  
in a mushroom cloud. She has washed  
her face with grit, her arms and legs  
with mud; her belly with sand.  
Her loofah collects granules of her skin  
leaving red pulp, her cheeks, open  
scars in the wind [*sic.*] (“Off the Wire”)

In the wake of war, ordinary domestic work becomes equivalent to surviving deadly circumstances. On a literal level, what the mother above is doing is sterilizing water that is “brown”-ed or contaminated by the dirt of war for her children. Yet, on a different level, what she is doing stands for a meaning that is beyond its supposed literal simplicity.

Metaphorically, this mother whose “face [...] arms and legs/ [...] belly [...] [...] skin/ [...] [and] cheeks” are muddied and scarred by the same war is trying to remove war from the most essential substance of life that war contaminates. When the water clears, the mother and her children can, at least symbolically, live a purer war-free life. The “mushroom cloud” metaphor is, of course, referring to the memorable scene of the atomic cloud forming above Nagasaki resulting from the explosion of the nuclear bomb over this Japanese city in 1945. What the *Safar Barlik* (1912) has done to this mother’s family and to other families is no less violent than the damage the “mushroom cloud” over Nagasaki caused when “thousands of non-combatants, among them the innocent, elderly and the sick, women and children, were annihilated” (Miscamble, 2011, p. 122). The “[g]rit,” “mud” and, “sand” that scar her at her work emphasize her trauma and the deep damage the war has inflicted on this toiling mother. Furthermore, and in the same lines above, the act of bathing becomes an act of revealing yet more hidden physical damage that the mother endures. The “loofah” only wipes away dirt to

unveil the dirtier face of a war that has ruined the mother's face "leaving red pulp [...] open/scars in the wind". However, the poetic fact that this mother survives war and trauma to provide for her family despite her multiple psychological and physical injuries, like Sitti and aunt Azzizy above, confers upon her the status of a savior. It also emphasizes an additional image of her as a strong and resourceful being, rather than a mere weak and desperate woman left behind after war.

Their muddled faces and their empty sanded bellies, their tears and their prayers, as well as their disturbing flashbacks unfold to the reader the story of these mothers' uneasy yet heroic survival. I say this because, in spite of these mothers' pain and the PTSDs they suffer, they are not pitiful figures. On the contrary, their ability to live and find means to help their surviving children is another form of resistance. These women do not fight to kill or be killed but suffer in order to live and empower. In roaming through their painful memories, one also notices that these women are capable of surviving beyond the overpowering element of pain. To survive, Sitti in "Burning Bush", Aunt Azzizy in "Freedom-Song," and the mother in "Off the Wire", and "Skaff Mother", cling to life by employing what trauma theorists call transformational objects into which they project their pain and attempt to reincarnate their integral self. These transformational objects are their coping strategies. Sitti and Aunt Azzizy, for example, use spiritual or positive coping strategies <sup>147</sup> like prayers or songs in an attempt to overcome their pain. In a state of euphoria, Sitti yells "Yasu!" to tell Jesus the stories of her long-lost husband. She seeks the help of the divine and amid destruction, Sitti perseveres and teaches "her girls prayers/ in a schoolhouse with two walls standing" ("Burning Bush"). Similarly, Aunt Azzizy and the mother "surrounded by pictures of Christ" cry out for their dead fathers and are simultaneously capable of singing their freedom song in which they

---

<sup>147</sup> I borrow the use of Spiritual-non-Spiritual coping strategies from Meisenhelder and Marcum's (2009) article "Terrorism, Post-traumatic Stress, Coping Strategies, and Spiritual Outcomes".

celebrate life: “we are lucky to be alive” and not killed in war (“Freedom-song”). The Skaff mother puts aside her separation anxiety and whispers: “‘Survive/ And come back to us’” (“Skaff Mother”). To “survive” and to “come back” is both the mother’s positive reminder and her farewell which instills hope in her heart and assures the little boys, in their exodus to the unknown, that there is still life ahead. Some “tiny prayers, nine days/ and nine days more” give another mother of war the power to sustain herself and caress her little children (“Making it New”, Abinader, 1999, p. 59)<sup>148</sup>. Performing a prayer in such a context is a ritual through which war survivors do not only connect themselves to the divine but exhale their pain and inhale life. A song the mother sings to her baby who “is still in her christening dress” is like a prayer of hope (“Off the Wire”). By transforming fear and pain into a lullaby to her baby, this mother revives part of her motherly wholeness and wipes out part of the fears her “war-addicted” baby may experience (“Off the Wire”).

### **The Fathers of War Tell their Stories**

In the war of poetry studied here, men have either died, been smuggled out of war-zones, or have remained almost silent. Their absence could be to let the story of war be presented from women’s perspectives; a perspective that is often marginalized during war (Khadim, 2010; Shirazi, 2010; Rimalt, 2007; Peach, 2001). As is clear from the poems discussed above, in the absence of men, women who survive war are given the stage to narrate their story and to demonstrate their own version of heroism manifested in their bitterly-earned survival for the ones they love, and their loyalty to the men they have lost (Imam, 2010).

But as men are also victimized by war and are participants in its trauma, their voices as survivors of wars and conflicts are heard and their stories narrated in this part of the chapter. The Skaff mother, who is the main speaker of “Skaff Mother”, now reads a letter

---

<sup>148</sup> Hereafter “Making it New”.

sent by one of her boys. Through this letter, read on the tongue of the Skaff boy who is now a fifty-five year old father of a Brazilian daughter, we are offered a chance to have a broader perspective of the Skaff's story and a more comprehensive insight into the trauma of separation:

I was still hungry  
When I left home, mother,  
to disappear from the one piece  
of earth I knew.  
[...]  
*Yumma*, that hunger's never left me,  
even though I'm big as an ox,  
fifty-five now, married,  
and master of a house  
with a good larder.  
Hunger still lurches  
inside me, like the sea voyage  
from Beirut to Brazil.  
sometimes I think  
I could eat the house out,

hearth, oven, gate, and all ("Word from Younger Skaff", Kahf, 2003, pp. 4-5)<sup>149</sup>

Central to the lines above, and to the speaker, once a boy and now an old man, is the expression of hunger. The letter begins with this man's longing for his mother's food and hunger continues to be the dominating metaphor of the Skaff's letter to his mother: "I was

---

<sup>149</sup> Hereafter "Younger Skaff".

still hungry/ [...] / Hunger still lurches/ inside me". That he "was" and is "still" longing for his mother's food is meant to emphasize the long duration of the Skaff's suffering which is initiated by his mother-child separation trauma. Such trauma, according to Hout (2008), continues "to wrap the lives of survivors long after the guns have fallen silent" (p. 95). The analogy that compares the Skaff's hunger to the long, distressing, and nauseating "voyage/ from Beirut to Brazil," further highlights the psychological nature of the Skaff's persisting desire for his mother's food. It is his mother that he misses terribly and endlessly, and food is the only anchor to that mother.

Additionally, there is something of a monstrous and gastronomical nature marring the psyche of the hungry Skaff. In the metaphor where he compares himself to an "Ox" (who has fallen into the sin of gluttony) is an emphasis of the giant and unquenched yearning for his family, particularly his mother. His hyperbolic gastronomical images of him eating his own "house," its "hearth," "oven," and "gate" to abase his psychological hunger intensify his separation anxiety. Neither his marriage, nor his good house nor his safe life in Brazil can compensate for the mother he still misses. However, in "Younger Skaff" the granddaughter partly resolves her father's dilemma as she plays the role of a surrogate. In fact, this girl, who copies her grandmother's features and ways, becomes her own grandmother's surrogate and hence, quite unconsciously, becomes her father's transformational object onto which he projects his own anxiety to overcome his separation trauma:

Wherever you are, *O mae*,  
I bet it fills your belly to know  
there's a twelve-year-old Brazilian girl  
with your hair and eye, who,  
though she's never seen  
you or your kitchen fire, makes

Syrian meat pies proper,  
backed golden and sealed  
with your same thumb press” (“Younger Skaff”)

The “twelve-year-old Brazilian girl” has inherited everything from her grandmother who lives a long distance away and whom she has never seen. The father could be exaggerating the similarity of “hair and eye,” of “kitchen fire,” and even of the “thumb press” between the two. However, he could be doing this to feel re-united with his mother again, through his daughter. Once again, food and hunger seem to be central to the Skaff boy. As the lines above show, his daughter knows how to build “kitchen fire,” she knows how to bake, and is able to provide her father with the “meat pies” he misses and likes. And as his mother is a main participant in the Skaff’s child-mother separation trauma, the Skaff extends his food imagery to include his mother. In his “I bet it fills your belly to know,” the focus shifts from the son’s long-lasting hunger to his mother’s. It is now the mother’s “belly” that is given care and attention. If the son longs for the mother, it is only natural that she equally longs for him. So, it is to satisfy her that he describes his daughter as a replica of her grandmother knowing this news is to “fill” the mother’s “belly” and to emotionally uplift her spirit. While doing this, this news about the daughter would also let the mother feel that her son, whom she smuggled out decades ago, is not alone, and that he has found a person to provide him with the care and love his mother wished she could have provided for him a long time ago had it not been for the *Safar Barlik* (1912).

One remarkable linguistic feature exists in “Younger Skaff” and this feature is code-switching. In his letter to his mother, Skaff code-switches to the colloquial “*Yumma*”, and then to its standard counterpart “*O mae*”, meaning mother “Younger Skaff”. These two references to the mother put in the speaker’s native tongue function as a linguistic variation that strengthens the emotional and the intimate impacts of the moment. That is to say, in the



poem above, central to the Skaff's separation trauma is the main recipient of his letter, his mother. That he code-switches twice and resorts to the use of his native tongue particularly when he addresses her "carries affective functions that serve for expressing emotions" (Shay, 2015, p. 466). The emotional message that is carried by the code-switching references in the case of the Skaff son is his endless longing for his mother, his "*Yumma*", and his "*O mae*". Furthermore, because a code-switched reference varies linguistically from the original language of the text, it would certainly draw the attention of the audience and let it sympathize with the speaker's feeling.

In the course of this chapter, an additional space is given to the voice of the man in poems where conflict or war provide a backdrop for discussion. This man is a Palestinian American father whose perspective and presence are central to many poems by Naomi Nye. Like many other Palestinians, this father was forced to leave his homeland to live and die in exile. But to cure his trauma following the Israeli occupation of Palestine, this father resorts to writing as a transformational object onto which he projects his pain in order to cope with the situation. Interestingly, Eleanor Roosevelt becomes this father's pen friend. For him to choose to write to Mrs. Roosevelt is not a coincidence. She was America's First Lady and herself a politician who "worked for black youth, the unemployed,/ She helped to found the United Nations" ("Knowing"). In a way, he sees her as a woman who believes in human rights. On "April 16, 1953," however, in the poem ironically entitled "Knowing", Mrs. Roosevelt sends the father a reply regarding his questions about Palestinian-Israeli conflict:

No, she said. I do not think Arab refugees  
Should be permitted to return to their homes  
In Israel. There are few homes to return to.  
[...]  
2. I do not know if it is advisable

To internationalize Jerusalem.

[...]

3. I do not know if there should be an Arab Palestine  
as independent state side by side with Israel. (“Knowing”)

Ironically, the First Lady of the United States who has been an advocate for the rights of the oppressed is among the last to give this stubborn father a satisfying, unbiased answer regarding Palestine or the Palestinian refugees. Her ignorant reply, with its replete “no” and “not,” clashes with the title of the poem and ridicules Mrs. Roosevelt. But the First Lady’s attitude does not put the father down. He perseveres: “he wrote her often./ [and] This was not her only reply” (“Knowing”). It really seems that this father has attached a healing power to writing. It preserves his home which he “carries on his back” and protects it against crumbling. In writing about his country, this father makes up for its absence “by representing, by giving figurative shape to presence” (Abraham and Torok 1995 as cited in Stocks, 2007, p. 78). In another poem by Nye entitled “Wavelength” the reader learns that this same father has actress Marie Brenner of *Vanity Fair* as a “longtime writer-friend” who “told him that his words, in person and writing, had changed her own perspectives about the middle east” (“Wavelength”). This father’s epistolary writing is the literary technique that helps him promote his country’s dilemma and overcome his trauma resulting from exile.

Narration is another technique the father resorts to in order to vent his pain following the Israeli occupation of Palestine and the subsequent dispersal of the Palestinians. In the poem above, he narrates to his audience the usual “Us” and “Them” story of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict without failing to maintain a humanitarian sense:

Once they started invading us.

Taking our houses and trees, drawing lines,

pushing us into tiny places,

[...]

We were sorry what happened to them but

we had nothing to do with it. (“Everything in Our World Did Not Seem to Fit”, Nye, 2011, p. 29)<sup>150</sup>

No sooner does the father’s “[o]nce they started invading us” create a sense of anger against what the Israelis did to the Palestinians than his “[w]e were sorry what happened to them” abases that same anger as he immediately brings to the mind of the audience the atrocities that befell the Jews during the Holocaust when, at the hands of the Nazis, a massive number of European Jews were either killed, or exiled, or lived under brutal conditions (Mankowitz, 2002). What this Palestinian American father does, in the light of his recognition of the atrocities befalling the Palestinians whose land, “houses”, “trees”, and belongings are demolished by the Israeli army, is trying to break the cycle of violence by humanizing the enemy who has once also led a life of misery. However, his “we are sorry what happened to them” conjoined with “but/ we had nothing to do with it” is an expression of empathy and a call for sympathy (“Everything”). Empathy with the Jews whose life was once plundered, and a call for these same people to be sympathetic with the Palestinians whose life they, the Israeli Jews, are now plundering.

It should be noted here, however, that what the father above says hides more than it reveals. That is to say, the father resorts to allusions instead of being direct in his claims. His “what happened to them” is not a direct reference to the Holocaust but an allusion that takes for granted the audience’s awareness of the genocide in which millions of Jews were murdered. His “someone else’s” in the rhetorical question “[w]hy was someone else’s need for a home/ greater than our need for our own homes/ we were already living in?” is also an

---

<sup>150</sup> Hereafter “Everything”.

allusion to the Israelis/ Jews who occupy Palestine, an allusion that eventually highlights the dilemma of the Palestinians following this occupation. Disguising his references when the referents are Israelis/ Jews could be a discourse technique played by the father. When he avoids a direct mention of the Holocaust in “what happened to them”, he steers clear of directly putting a perpetrator in a context that calls for empathy, yet he still invites the audience to feel “sorry”. However, his “someone else’s” in the rhetorical question above is a general rejection of disadvantaging a nation (i.e. the Palestinian) for the wellbeing of another nation (i.e. the Israeli). This rejection still invites the audience to understand the Palestinians’ natural attachment and need for the homes they lived in for ages and have now been taken from them by the Israelis / Jews. His rhetorical question, which does not deny the Israelis/ Jews their natural need for a homeland, indirectly emphasizes the assertion made by a member of the Jewish anti-Zionist camp, Edwin Montagu, “that it [Balfour Declaration] means that Mohammedans [Muslims] and Christians are to make way for the Jews [...] you will find a population in Palestine driving out its present inhabitants, taking all the best country [...] Palestine will become the world’s Ghetto” (cited in Harms and Ferry, 2008, p. 71). The Arab American father’s rational rhetoric, while it helps break the cycle of violence of the modern world’s longest conflict: the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, it also helps the father survive peacefully. It raises awareness of the natural rights of the Palestinians in a diplomatic way without dehumanizing their Israeli opponents.

The UN partition of Palestine <sup>151</sup> which was applauded by the United States has enraged both Palestinians and Arabs. In the poem “Many Asked Me Not to Forget Them”

---

<sup>151</sup> On November 29, 1947, the UN voted, to the anger of Arabs, to give “56 percent of Palestine to a foreign population that only made up slightly over 30 percent of the whole. (The population figures for 1946 are 1.3 million Arabs and 600,000 Jews, with 30,000 other)” (Harms, 2008, p. 92).

(Nye, 2011, p. 33)<sup>152</sup> below, this Arab American father alludes to America's involvement in the displacement of the Palestinians. To attain the dramatic effect of highlighting the Palestinian dilemma and hence his audience's sympathy, he again relies on rhetorical questions and involves himself in a dramatic monologue. Yet, he does all this without losing grip of his quiet tone and humanitarian sense:

But justice never smiled on us. Why didn't it?

I tried to get Americans to think of them.

But they were too involved with their own affairs  
to imagine ours. And you can't blame them, really.

How much do I think of Africa? I always did feel sad  
in the back of my mind for places I didn't  
have enough energy to worry about. ("Many Asked")

His rhetorical question in "justice never smiled on us. Why didn't it?" is meant to confront and persuade the audience of the biased treatment the Palestinian received from the world. Even "justice" itself showed them his grim face and denied the Palestinian his "smile".

After the confrontation, the humane father finds the negligent world a justification; it is "too involved" has not "enough energy to worry" and has thus put the Palestinian issue "in the back" of its mind. Furthermore, as if trying to see it from a different perspective that avoids the overt blaming of a particular people, this speaker creates an analogous context in which he shifts the blame to himself: "How much do I think of Africa?" the father asks. *It is only natural that the Americans do not think about Palestine, I myself do not concern myself with African issues*, he says, as this father tries to rationalize the issue. Nevertheless, the reference the father makes to Africa could possibly be an allusion to this continent's colonial

---

<sup>152</sup> Hereafter "Many Asked".

history. In this case, the Palestinians' plight is reminiscent of the unjust colonialism which once afflicted Africa. Or else, he could simply be referring to Africa as a far-off place with which the speaker has no ties and in which he might not be interested. In both cases, the Arab American father resorts to his eloquence and his soft language to dramatize a message about the rights of the Palestinians to their land. He tries to achieve this through a mild context that avoids intimidating his audience, and he thus reduces the possibility of violent or unwanted reactions from audience who might not be supporters of the cause of the Palestinian people, such as Eleanor Roosevelt of the poem "Knowing" above. His rhetorical questions, his allusion, and his mild context help this father achieve a sense of self-satisfaction and inner peace. His ability to ascribe "meaning to painful events" (Meisenhelder and Marcum, 2009, p. 47) is this exiled Palestinian father's coping strategy and an indicator of his unique ability to outgrow his trauma and adapt positively to the new realities surrounding him (Meisenhelder and Marcum, 2009).

Emotional hunger, about which the speaker of "Fifty Years Since I Prayed or Thought in Arabic" (Nye, 2011, p. 39)<sup>153</sup> complains, seems to be an experience common to the exiled. After forty years of separation, the Skaff still craves his mother's food ("Younger Skaff"). And the Arab American father who is the main speaker of "Fifty Years" is also hungry, but for good news, or for "something better to report" in order to outgrow his trauma:

but I never lost a hunger for something better to report.

I always liked the BBC even though

they couldn't save us from what happened,

no one could save us, we couldn't save ourselves ("Fifty Years")

---

<sup>153</sup> Hereafter "Fifty Years".

Hunger implies restlessness and emotional deprivation; it might be hidden but is traumatic. There is something monstrous, almost sinister in the Skaff's description of himself as an ox in "Younger Skaff" above. There is something breathtaking yet fatiguing in the image of the Palestinian father who endlessly chases hope or "something better to report" in the poem "Fifty Years". In spite of his awareness that the world's lack of interest in Palestine makes it an impossibility to report any good news about his country, he does not resort to the rhetoric of victimization but instead tries to ascribe to the situation a different meaning. If no one could "save us," says the father, we the Palestinians, "couldn't save ourselves" in the first place ("Fifty Years"). By doing this, the father tries to break the cycle of violence again and to "effectively diminish post-traumatic stress" that saves him from falling into the trap of depression and anxiety as highlighted by Meisenhelder and Marcum (2009, p. 47).

It is a feature in Nye's poetry to treat the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in a way that sees brighter possibilities for the world's longest fight. Abu Mahmoud, the speaker of the poem "Abu Mahmoud", is also Palestinian (a West-Banker) and is stricken by the violence of military occupation. However, he does not resort to rhetoric of victimization but feels superior. He can see light and life springing up somewhere in spite of his long-lived pain. His spontaneous metaphors can capture a "gleam[-ing] white" and a shining "sun" in things as ugly as "[s]ettlements" and "guns":

Across his valley the military

Settlements gleamed white

He said, That's where the guns live,

As simply as saying, It needs sun. ("Abu Mahmoud")

If "across" the "valley" there is an armed conflict and a land occupied, the "valley" where this speaker stands now is "his" and he still owns it. It is in this spot that Abu Mahmoud cultivates hope and grows, along with his plants, his objects to fight the trauma caused by

occupation and loss. It is in this garden of Abu Mahmoud that a unique love story is authored by the plants and the gardener. Of this garden, he is, says Abu Mahmoud, a “governor, king” whose citizens are his “eggplant,” his “marble-sized peaches/ hard green *mish-mish* and delicate lilt/ of beans” his “enormous onions held light/ and the trees so weighted with fruits” and his “darling tomato” (“Abu Mahmoud”). His images of “marble”, “green [...] delicate”, “enormous” yet “light” fruits and vegetables are his images of delicacy and luxury in a wasteland. His endearment references add a sense of delicacy to Abu Mahmoud’s images and replace the stern atmosphere of war with one of passion and intimacy. His governor-king’s garden of vegetables, he tells us, remains his “darling” or his “*ya habibi*” (“Abu Mahmoud”) when everything else in Palestine has lost love to conflict and war. What Abu Mahmoud does is transforming his loss unto his garden and then becomes the sovereign who reigns the place. Reigning over his own garden, Abu Mahmoud comes to terms with being uprooted and dispersed.

### **War and Trauma and the Pains and Worries of the Younger Generation**

Although trauma might travel across generations and the pains of the forefathers might be bequeathed to their offspring, the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries have known wars and armed conflict enough to create genuine worries for the sons and daughters. As has been explained in the introduction to this chapter, the younger generation of speakers, who happen to be Arab American, is mainly concerned with the traumatic events succeeding the 9/11 terrorist attacks and that is why poems with the 9/11 scenes in their background will make up the remaining part of this chapter. Other conflicts in the Middle East do however provide a context for poetic analysis of war imagery from trauma theory perspectives. By these I mean the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990) and the Arab-Israeli armed conflict (1948–Present). Both play a role in the psychological growth, the reaction, and the life of the speakers of war poetry below. The reactions of the younger generation to war and trauma vary from failure in



love, to psychological imbalance and anxiety, to being blasphemous and ironically hopeful. As the analysis will show further on, in their reaction to war and conflict and their subsequent injuries, the younger speakers differ drastically from their elders. The elders seem more tolerant, more hopeful, and even stronger.

### **A Hopeless and an Angry Generation**

Don't be afraid of the picture  
you see of the hezbollah, faces wrapped  
when they talk to the camera, so they won't  
be recognized. Don't be afraid of the m-16's, strapped  
like a quiver to their shoulders packed with ammo  
instead of feathers that can end your life  
or mine. Don't be afraid of their fast language ("Sixty Minutes", Abinader, 1999, pp.  
34-35)<sup>154</sup>

The dull, war-like images of the lines above cannot pass between the young lovers in "Sixty Minutes" without creating a black hole in their relationship, a hole that threatens to annihilate their entire love story. If images of militia men like the "hezbollah[ 's]" <sup>155</sup> with their faces hidden or "wrapped" and their bodies loaded with "m-16" arms, have not already shaken this relationship, the Arab American speaker of the poem would not have resorted to the imperative negative in "[d]on't be afraid" to calm down her American lover. She knows very well that, amidst war and conflict, the American part of her Arab American identity cannot

---

<sup>154</sup> Hereafter "Sixty Minutes".

<sup>155</sup> "Arabic Ḥizb Allāh ("Party of God"), also spelled Hezbollah or Hizbullah, militia group and political party that first emerged as a faction in Lebanon following the Israeli invasion of that country in 1982." (Hezbollah, 2014).

protect her from her American lover's skeptic looks. For her American lover, the only part that matters now in the identity of his beloved is that she is originally an Arab and a possible heir to what he assumes as the terrorist genes of "hezbollah". "You remember that I am an Arab when you saw them," the woman confronts her lover ("Sixty Minutes"). Her subsequent apologia "I was born in Pennsylvania" and have no "suicide pact with someone," and that her "small hands can grip nothing bigger than a pen/or a needle" do not seem to be of much avail ("Sixty Minutes"). Such a lengthy and unspontaneous apology sounds like the defense of a convict against terrorist accusations but not that of a soft American woman whose delicate and "small hands" know nothing but art. It is clear that American media's images of conflict in the speaker's motherland has put her intimate relationship at stake and turned this speaker into the American lover's scapegoat.

Before the poem ends, however, the speaker is able to put an end to her earlier pathetic apology. Her defensive "I was born in Pennsylvania" becomes the declarative-assertive "I am an Arab, too" ("Sixty Minutes"). Along with recalling her Arab half, she also recalls imagery of the misery the Lebanese, her own people back home, live in as a result of the Israeli occupation of Southern Lebanon where Hezbollah operates. It is to these images of destruction and death, usually absent from the American media, that she now draws his attention: "civilians killed that week hidden/ in the bunker behind the school drinking water from plastic jugs" ("Sixty Minutes"). Her imagery becomes more graphic as she describes the macabre-like scene in an area where the Israeli army stroke a Lebanese civilian shelter where "limbs dangling/ from the litters as they are put on trucks with sliding racks/ like a bakery van" ("Sixty Minutes"). These visual images of decay and of rotten bodies are the epiphany the beloved tries to envision to her lover before their relationship announces its death. However, whether the lover wakes up or not remains unanswered in the poem. But one thing

is clear; the lovers' whole intimate relationship is imbued with political narratives. A trauma begins, albeit silently.

A tour of Spain, a country that was once stricken by a civil war in 1936, reminds the speaker of "Dried Flowers" (Abinader, 1999, pp. 51-52)<sup>156</sup> not only of the civil war in her motherland but of its subsequent loss and wrecked loves. All it takes her to begin her associative remembering is an old Spanish veteran who outlived war but whose "tears have yellowed" his face:

*There are no poor like the poor of Spain.*

The old man spits his food and tells me  
of the war. His tears have yellowed  
over four decades ("Flowers").

War has ruined people's spirits and made them the "poor[-est]" in the world. It has ruined lavish tastes and beautiful faces and left behind sickly beings. These gloomy descriptions of the remnants of war stimulate the speaker's already anxious spirit that she "shudder[s]" soon after the old man's "memory slices into" hers. This shudder evokes the memory of the speaker's own trauma of war and loss. The memory is so vivid that her entire body is aroused and seems to respond both aggressively and defensively: "I want to clap/ My hands over my ears" ("Flowers"). In this hyperarousal is a manifestation of a soul that is painfully haunted by past experience. This soul could hear the cries of pain and death but is paralyzed. In a semi-hallucinating reaction, this young speaker cries, "It is not my fault," as if to announce herself innocent. The intensity of war trauma has been so severe. The speaker thinks every tear is her responsibility and every pain is hers to heal.

---

<sup>156</sup> Hereafter "Flowers".

The speaker's tragic confession that she is "dispossess"-ed is her flight from a situation where she feels paralyzed and unable to fight. This realization is also the concluding remark of "Dried Flowers". From the perspective of trauma theory, the Arab American speaker's apology and her confession is a "flight-or-fight response" through which the traumatized person momentarily soothes inner wreckage when the context provokes an unwanted memory (Allen, 2005, p. 28). However, in a different context, resorting to art is another healing tool or a transformational object that soothes a speaker's wrecked spirit. In "In the Country of My Dreams" (Abinader, 1999, pp. 18-20)<sup>157</sup> the speaker, who is devastated by the Lebanese scenes following the end of the civil war, recalls the literature of Khalil Gibran to achieve self-integration: "it is you,/ Khalil, who works our bodies/ so completely, generations clutch/ your words to steady bottoms" ("My Dreams"). She furthermore apostrophizes Marcel Khalife, the famous Lebanese singer, to revive the post-war generation and war's survivors: "it is you,/ Marcel, who makes them leap up shouting in gospel,/ clutching the hands of their children, dancing" ("My Dreams"). When, in responding to trauma, fear shakes "bodies" and "bottoms", the person involved needs to "clutch" something to feel steady and still. When the speaker recalls Khalil, it is so that generations stricken by fear and pain can read his literature and feel strong, strengthened by his "words to steady bottoms" to overcome their fear. Similarly, Marcel's singing is thought of by the speaker as the best antidote to healing inner injuries. Marcel's songs that are inspired by the "gospel" would have the double effect of healing through art and religion. The impact of the songs can be seen in parents and children who "leap up shouting" and begin "dancing". Both "shouting" and "dancing" are overt expressions of a body that might have been fostering its agony in silence.

---

<sup>157</sup> Hereafter "My Dreams".

From trauma theory perspectives, “[t]raumas” need to be “acted out, shared, and processed without the necessity of words” (Macintosh, 2017, p. 435) and a way to act out the stress when a person is “emotionally charged” in response to pain of any sort is art (Dreifuss-Kattan, 2016, p. 16; Macintosh, 2017). That is because art “can be one of the most powerful tools” or “weapons in the fight against” the consequences to of the emotionally stressful situation (Dreifuss-Kattan, 2016, p. 16). Consequently, the literature of Khalil and the songs of Marcel can be viewed as forms of art that constitute the necessary equilibrium that is needed by a generation “of children who have been raised by war” to feel “complete” and “steady” (“My Dreams”). Whether it is the reading experience itself and the joy it may bring to shattered inners, or the “shouting” and “dancing” to the songs, they are all nonverbal artistic responses that let out pain and relieve stress. When during war “fire” and “soldiers” burn everything in the name of religion, and prayers “to God, to Allah, to anyone who will listen” have gone unheeded, a song, suggests the speaker of the poem, may recreate a bond between a war-stricken generation and its lost sacred “gospel” (“My Dreams”).

To further emphasize the role of art in healing the injuries of trauma, the speaker of “My Dreams” bestows upon artists the title of “heroes” and urges more of them to participate in painting a counter-Guernicaian <sup>158</sup> picture of the post-war era. The “stroke of the painter, the string of the *oud*,/ [and] the beat of the drum” are part of this art-therapy. Using images that are inspired by art, the speaker is very careful to draw them in a way that counterattacks similar war-grounded images. The “stroke of the painter” is to defeat a possible strike by a military aircraft. Similarly, the “string of the *oud*” is not that of a deadly arrow on a bow, and the “beat” of an artist’s “drums” are to instill joy and deaden the last echo of the tom-tom of war. The poem concludes with a clear message that conforms with empirical findings about

---

<sup>158</sup> Term is mine. It is inspired by Picasso’s surrealist oil painting Guernica.

healing trauma through art (Stocks, 2007; Dreifuss-Kattan, 2016; Macintosh, 2017). If war creates trauma, then art heals, suggests the speaker of the poem, because it is “aimed directly/ at our hearts” to “keep us alive” (“My Dreams”).

There is a noticeable calmness in the reaction of Abinader’s speakers who survive war or conflict. Nowhere do we hear her speakers swearing or see them lose control over themselves, Nor does Abinader create graphic sketches of war with grotesque details. In this sense, she differs from Kahf whose portrayals of war and its tragedies are more violent. In the poem “Disbeliever” (Kahf, 2003, p. 75-76)<sup>159</sup>, a speaker’s angry reaction following retrievals of war scenes annihilates this speaker’s faith. In fact, “Disbeliever” is not only the title of the poem below, but also its refrain:

By the limping of the people of Iraq  
By the sound of frantic running in Qana, in Kosovo  
By the men and boys of Hama massacred  
By the swollen bodies in a river in Rwanda  
and Afghani women and the writers of Algiers,  
I am a disbeliever  
in everything (“Disbeliever”)

“I am a disbeliever/ in everything” is more than an expression of a malaise brought about by scenes of massacres around the world: in Iraq, Qana, Kosovo, Hama, Rwanda, Afghanistan, and Algeria. It is a blasphemous cry that renounces faith “in everything”. This cry is entailed by the graphic visual, auditory, and olfactory images of wars in these places as captured in the lines above. The speaker’s imagination conjures up the horror of death in spectacular sensual detail. We see the mutilated bodies of the “limping” Iraqis, we hear the panicking

---

<sup>159</sup> Hereafter “Disbeliever”.

sounds of the terrified people in Qana and Kosovo and see and smell the rotten bodies of “men and boys of Hama” and those of floating corpses in the “river in Rwanda” (“Disbeliever”). Recalling these tragic scenes in this graphic yet vivid way, could be the speaker’s choice to let the audience feel that war is a real thing and a horrible thing too. But this has its consequences on the speaker herself. That is because such horrifying memories or scenes transform the once “coherent self” into a “fracture”-ed one and cause it to fall apart (Stocks, 2007).

In such a scenario where the self is broken, disbelief becomes an expected consequence of the terrifying exposure (Allen, 2005). While maintaining a connection with the divine may help in the healing process, empirical researches in the field also suggest that exposure to trauma may break and disavow an already established bond with God (Allen 2005, Houck-Loomis, 2012; Gostečnik *et al.*, 2014). Commenting on victims of stressful experiences and their subsequent perception of God, Slavič *et al.* (2014) writes:

[p]erception of God may also change greatly: the victim, who expected God to have been a savior or at least to have prevented these cruelties and traumatic events from happening, may begin to regard God as cruel, indifferent and even guilty. Or the victim may reject and even strive against God [...] the victim might even blame God for the trauma and think of God as connected to it. (p. 691)

The speaker of “Parturition 1999” (Kahf, 2003, pp. 77-78)<sup>160</sup> embodies just that. For her, a God who lets evil happen is cruel and cannot be the savior she expected Him to be in her pre-traumatic state: “Everyone in the world today/ belongs to the age of deformity./ God too.” For her, God is a “deform[-ation]” because He allows “deformity”, manifested in war and its subsequent tragedies, to happen. This anger towards God reaches a climax when the speaker

---

<sup>160</sup> Hereafter “Parturition”.

of “Parturition” substitutes doubt, or the disbelief of the speaker of “Disbeliever” before her, with the sacrilegious suggestion that a God who lets war continue is as “deform”-ed as our war-stricken world. “How does God make such a thing?” she asks:

people are having babies with no faces,

missing organs,

stumps for limbs,

no genitals

Everyone alive

is the mother

The father is misshapen (“Parturition”)

It is thanks to the speaker’s graphic imagination that permeates the whole scene that the lines above are totally devoid of hope and are utterly devastating. Family members are taken, one by one, and are then portrayed in a grotesque way. The “father is misshapen”, “babies” are born “without faces” and with “missing organs” and “no genitals”. The cruelty of these images is meant to draw a realistic image of war, and also to move the hearts of the readers. That that “the mother” is the only one “alive” adds yet more misery to an already miserable scene. When the family is dismembered and is lost to war, this mother’s life becomes life in death. This again emphasizes what Shirazi (2010) states about the mothers who, after war, are left to endure its subsequent misery and enjoy none of its gains. The concluding scene of a mother surrounded by the mutilated and dead family members is undoubtedly apocalyptic and ruining of the mother’s soul.

One thing which is noticeable so far is the contrast between the voices of the younger speakers who react to the scenes of war and death above, and the voices and the reactions of the older mothers to war in the poems before. We have seen that in spite of their loss and pain, the mothers of war were able to reach out to a divine power to heal themselves,



something that the young speakers are incapable of doing. We have also seen in Nye's poetry that the old Arab Palestinian father and Abu Mahmoud are more accepting of and capable of outgrowing and even ascribing positive meanings to their difficult experiences; however, the younger generation fails to do so. Age could be an important factor that explains why older speakers are better at finding relief in prayer, as do Sitti and Azzizy when they pray to Jesus in "Freedom-song" and "Burning Bush". It is traditionally believed that the older people become, the more likely they are attached to a form of religion or a supernatural power (Davie and Vincent, 1998; Eisenhandler, 2005) especially in "issues of consolation" (Dawkins, 2006 as cited in Wilkinson and Coleman, 2010, p. 356). They are also better at showing a less angry reaction toward, and more acceptance of, their post-traumatic status than younger speakers. According to Davie and Vincent (1998):

Older people, it appeared, have always been more religious than the young. Whether elderly people have regarded God as judgmental (the source of all their troubles) or as a father figure (a rock in the storm of life), they have always taken him more seriously than their sons and daughters. (pp. 101-02)

The less angry reaction toward, and greater acceptance of their post-traumatic status by the elderly speakers of the poetry of war is clearly demonstrated in the poems I have mentioned so far, so age can clearly be a strong factor in this. That is because, "increasing age was associated with increased acceptance of negative emotional experiences, and this process statistically accounted for the inverse relationship between age on the one hand and anger and anxiety on the other hand" (Shallcross *et al.*, 2013, p. 745). These empirical findings do particularly help explain the angry tone and the grotesque representations of war in Kahf's poetry above, while also accounting for the hopelessness in the poems of Abinader where the speakers belong to the younger generation.

A milder tone and reaction to war and its subsequent injuries is demonstrated in Nye's poem entitled "War" (Nye, 2011, pp. 49-50)<sup>161</sup>, in which the young speaker resorts to the conditional "if" before taking any post-war action. With the "if" introduced, the action the speaker takes is rather sophisticated. She decides to confront the chaos of war with her own version of what I shall call passive or peaceful chaos:

If this is what we studied for,  
heads bent over books in wooden desks  
engraved with the names of the dead,  
then I have a new feeling for  
subtraction.

[...]

If this is the spectrum of pronouns—  
*you kill, he or she kills, anyone might kill*—  
then I speak a new language without them ("War")

To emphasize a war's absurdity and complexity, the speaker resorts to a metaphorical proposal that is extreme in nature and hence as absurd and complex as war itself. Her proposal is about redefining mathematics and grammar. If war is about taking away peace and life, then it would be better to drop "subtraction" from all mathematical processes and erase the concept of taking away altogether from the practices of humanity. Similarly, if subjects in sentences are conjoined with the verb "kill", then it would be safer for humanity to drop from language any "spectrum of pronouns" that may function as predicates in "*you kill, he or she kills, anyone might kill*," ("War"). This redefinition of both mathematics and language brings chaos to the very organized world of knowledge and learning. However, this

---

<sup>161</sup> Hereafter "War".

chaos is meant to be created in order to denote the chaotic scenes war creates and leaves behind it. It additionally mocks learned minds which propagate or accept the violence entailed by war through their silence. Mathematics and its formulas, language and grammar lose their intense sense of cohesion when war de-structures everything. Additionally, the irony in setting the poem “War” at a school and in a room for praying is meant to re-emphasize the unlimited damage caused by war. We see it “in wooden desks/ engraved with the names of the dead,” and “we bow our heads to pray/ in corner, by the iron stove” (“War”) after the war is over. Benign and innocent images of children bending their heads to either read their books on “wooden desks” at schools or to “pray” contrast with wars’ cruelties. Childhood misery during war is captured in the metaphor which turns school “wooden desks” into memorial plaques where the names of the deceased schoolchildren are “engraved”. The image is indeed beyond a schoolchild’s understanding. And although disturbing to the viewer, it is an expression of one awful reality of war that cannot be ignored.

This speaker finds peace in the memory of her grandmother, another Sitti, who, like Abinader’s Sitti, has also been a war survivor. Associating her current situation with memories of her grandmother who experienced and witnessed war, the speaker of “War” can retain a sense of peace. Sitti’s post-traumatic lesson is emotionally balanced, something to be expected with elder speakers of war poetry of war as has been explained above (Davie and Vincent, 1998; Eisenhandler, 2005; Shallcross *et al.*, 2013). Typical of her age-group, Sitti, the speaker informs us, taught her to be patient and to learn to wait: “I will wait beside her stone,/ telling the same story she told/ of the river of waiting” (“War”). As “waiting” is a long process and might even be endless, Sitti’s analogy of the “river” conveys this message about waiting and enduring. In another poem by Nye, a speaker who sees Israeli soldiers ravaging her ancestors’ homes, exercises this same patience and swallows her pain “we all need/ to swallow hard again so the lumps dissolve/ and pressure eases and our worlds mingle kindly”

(“The Burn”, Nye, 2011, p. 53)<sup>162</sup>. The smooth “river of waiting” of the poem above (“War”), turns into something harder. It is now “hard [...] lumps” (“Burn”). But as the speaker seems to be determined to wait and not to be driven to anger like Kahf’s speakers before her, or to eternal sadness, like Abinader’s speakers, she convinces herself that if she endures, “pressure eases and our worlds mingle kindly” (“Burn”). By “our worlds” she means the worlds of the two opposing powers who are involved in fighting each other. In spite of their awareness of the atrocities of war which they describe in their songs, Nye’s younger speakers have found their coping strategy in patience and in clinging to hope. Theirs is what the speaker of “Wavelength” describes as an “endless stubborn hope”.

Even though hope might be a naïve form of resistance and a very unrealistic one when war and conflict dominate the scene for a long time, it could be the speakers’ defense mechanism or transformational object that casts light over as dark a setting as war. It is true that a speaker’s naïve hope may silence her when the situation calls for an action such as boldly condemning the predator, however this seemingly naïve coping strategy saves her from falling into the trap of violence. It may also save her from becoming the victim of a depression that is born from the womb of hopelessness and pessimism. Scenes in Nye’s “It is not a game, it was never a game” (Nye, 2005, p. 66-67)<sup>163</sup> are traumatizing due to their graphic nature, yet they are put on the tongue of a young speaker who still clings to hope.<sup>164</sup> A Palestinian girl with a cut “arm, the right one/ that held a pencil” and a demolished “small

---

<sup>162</sup> Hereafter “Burn”.

<sup>163</sup> Hereafter “game”.

<sup>164</sup> Nye’s poem “It is not a game, it was never a game” could be an implied protest by the author against what happened during the Bush administration in 2003 when the US military designed deck of playing cards “depicting the most wanted” Iraqis from Saddam Hussain’s party, hence turning a devastating war into a card game that gamble with the life of people (McGrath, 2003).

stone house/ with an iron terrace” (“game”) are meant to shock the readers and to move their hearts away from violence and fighting to peace and coexistence as manifested in “an endless stubborn hope-someday there will be justice for Palestinians and Israelis living, somehow, together” (“Wavelength”). In a similar manner, when the speaker of “Passing the Refugee Camp” (Nye, 2002, pp. 30) passes through the camp and sees a boy with a “bruised eye” and a father who has been humiliated and “beaten by soldiers” in front of “his sons/ aged 2 and 4”, she assures them that they will not be left alone. To accomplish this, she draws images that borrow their olive-green color from Palestine, the motherland of the refugees in the camp. Her personification of the “olive’s dusky gray-green shadow/ which “won’t leave a single one of its people alone” (“Refugee Camp”) is the speaker’s attempt to dye the dull atmosphere of the camp with lively green and to nourish hope. The olive tree has always been a symbol of Palestine, the land from which the boy, the father, and the olive tree spring. They are siblings and united since none of them will leave the other to misery and destruction. Resorting to rhetoric might be too simplistic an approach to use with refugees in a desolate camp, but where no other means of comfort can be reached, an enduring symbol from the motherland may help the refugees uplift their down-trodden spirits. In resorting to imagery and symbolism, the speaker tries to tell the Palestinian refugees that if they are uprooted now, it is only temporary. A family member, the green olive tree, is still resisting in the Holy Land and re-unification is thus a strong possibility.

One of the positive consequences of Nye’s speaker “stubborn hope” is that it can draw an optimistic picture out of an awful reality. In “Amir and Anna” (Nye, 2011, p. 46)<sup>165</sup>, the possibility of a hopeful co-existence is exaggerated to turn into a potential love story between historic enemies. In this poem, Amir the Palestinian, and Anna the Israeli, are in love, in

---

<sup>165</sup> Hereafter “Amir and Anna”.

disregard for the continuous armed conflict between their own peoples: “Their names begin with A,/ Contain the same number of letters./ They live one mile apart” (“Amir and Anna”). The simple facts that both names begin with the same letter, and that they live close to each other, are more significant and hopeful for the very optimistic speaker than the age-old, ongoing armed conflict between Amir and Anna’s own people. Such love is not without fear as long as the Palestinian-Israeli conflict continues. The speaker seems to capture that fear felt by both Amir and Anna in her portrayal of Amir who “dives under his bed” whenever there is a fight, and in her portrayal of Anna’s anxiety that makes her “afraid of everything” even “of toast” (“Amir and Anna”). Yet, in spite of the fear that hovers over the love story, the speaker of “Amir and Anna” like Nye’s other speakers before her, still finds hope in the scene. No sooner does this speaker capture the fear of both Amir and Anna than she shifts the focus to the “red poppies” surrounding the houses of the Arabs and Israelis and waiting for spring to “rise and rise on every side” (“Amir and Anna”). The sudden presence of flowers alleviates the fear of the prior scene. That these red flowers are quietly reposing helps in toning down the effect of the portrayal of Amir hiding under his bed and Anna’s fear of trivial things. The speaker’s final suggestion that the reposing “red poppies” will ‘rise and rise on every side’ symbolizes the hope that Nye’s speakers continue to grow even when the situation seems hopeless.

Another coping strategy that Nye’s speakers use is humanizing the Other. In using this coping strategy, her speakers try to break the circle of violence which may go on forever in conflict zones. In his article “Replacement Children: The Transgenerational Transmission of Traumatic Loss”, Gabriele Schwab (2009) emphasizes that a “culture that embraces the dehumanization of enemies feeds into a politics of revenge and retribution” (p. 305). It is feeding that very revenge that Nye’s speakers manage to avoid. Thus, in the story of Amir and Anna, the speaker proposes a symbolic reconciliation through an inter-racial love story

between historic enemies. A similar phenomenon can be observed in “Jerusalem”, another poem by Nye whose speaker sings to the city central to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The speaker of “Jerusalem” is clear about her view point: “I’m not interested in/ Who suffered the most./ I’m interested in/ People getting over it”. For her, to “suffer” is not the point, to get over it, that is her point.

### **War Poetry and the Crisis of Iraq**

One of the findings of this chapter is the emphasis the four Arab American poets put on the wars in Iraq and on the subsequent traumas caused by these wars. Iraq occupies a good part of the poetry studied here. The sympathetic preoccupation with this country has its humanitarian reasons. As an Arab media observer, I do not think it is an exaggeration when I say that after the Arab-Israeli conflict, no armed atrocity has occupied and continues to occupy minds more than the American war on Iraq which started in 1991 after Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait, continued throughout through the American sanction on Iraq to erupt again after the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent American-led war on Iraq in 2003. My consciousness interprets Iraq as the country of war and loss. I was bidding my teenage years farewell in 1991, but, although I am now a resident of Saudi Arabia, the fears that both the invasion and the war have instilled in me still haunt me today. Those fears continued to grow with the escalating violence, destruction, deaths, and cultural erosion in Iraq. America is always part of the equation: it is Iraq against America, and the American soldiers against the Iraqi people. The ethical and humanitarian justifications of the war on Iraq, particularly the 2003 invasion, are debatable. Castleden (2011), Cushman (2005), (Danchev and MacMillan, 2004), and (Bonn *et al.*, 2010) among many other writers acknowledge the other ugly face of the US-led 2003 invasion of Iraq. Commenting on this, Cushman (2005) writes:

Seeing the Iraq war as justifiable on moral and ethical grounds is a distinct minority view within the liberal community. Even Human Rights Watch, which played a

significant role in documenting the heinous crimes of Saddam's regime, claimed that the Iraq war was not a humanitarian [...] The arguments by the United States that it was removing a tyrant fell flat against the recognition that the United States had once supported Saddam Hussein in his brutal war against Iran. Moreover, the United States [...] fostered Iraqi resistance to Saddam but cruelly abandoned that resistance to the brutal retaliation of the Ba'ath regime (p. 2).

That the interests of Iraqi people were not and are not in the American political agenda is emphasized in the documents of the leading *Global Policy Forum Online*. Among them is the one entitled "Destruction of Cultural Heritage" which was published in 2014. According to this document, the US invasion left Iraq, once the cradle of the riches of the Mesopotamian civilization, limping. According to this document, US troops and military airstrikes deliberately destroyed and damaged Iraq's National Library and "pillaged the National Museum" ("Destruction of Cultural Heritage", 2014). Furthermore, American troops "constructed a military base on the site of ancient Babylon [...] [and] damaged or destroyed many historic buildings and artifacts." ("Destruction of Cultural Heritage", 2014). And whatever remained of Iraq's history was left to thieves who "ruined thousands of incomparable, unprotected archeological sites" ("Destruction of Cultural Heritage", 2014) while the American military turned a blind eye. Looting the heritage of Iraq belittles art worldwide and depress the people of Iraq. There is no doubt that the insult the Iraqis feel seeing their history systematically wrecked is added to the injury of other scandalous military practices that befell them during the American invasion. The infamous Abu-Ghraib <sup>166</sup> prison

---

<sup>166</sup> Abu Ghraib prison was a U. S. Army detention center for captured Iraqis from 2003-2005. In April 30, 2004- Maj. Gen. Antonio Taguba released a report detailing the abuses of American interrogators and guards against Iraqi detainees in Abu Ghraib. These abuses that were aired to the public in 2004 included, but are not limited to, punching, slapping, and forcing male Iraqi detainees to masturbate while being photographed, jumping on



where Iraqi detainees were subjected to the humiliation of American prison guards is a scandal that caused worldwide disapproval and humiliated and disturbed the Iraqis even further.

To facilitate its political agenda against Iraq, the government of the United States employed American media to the government's own favor. Via their own TV channels, American viewers "were bombarded with debates on military action— many of them generating little more than earnestness and emotion" (Dumbrel in Danchev and MacMillan, 2004, p. 33; Bonn *et al.*, 2010). Rhetoric about America's right to wage a war against Iraq flooded American media including newspapers and magazines, with the "alternate framing of the Iraq issue in the general media [...] overwhelmed by the dominant, pro-war news frame" (Bonn *et al.*, 2010, p. 87). Thanks to Western perception of Arabs and the East in general once as epitome of eroticism, fantasy, and barbarity, and now as epitome of lying, terrorism, irrationality, and fanaticism, (Lewis and Macmaster, 1998; Kahf, 1999; Lewis, 2004; Almond, 2007; Shaheen, 2009; Nash, 2012; Nelson, 2015), the demonization of Iraq and Iraqi people, as part of the ever inferior East, was not a difficult task to accomplish.<sup>167</sup> Furthermore, the awful realities of war and the other scandalous behaviors by the American soldiers in Iraq were often downplayed by this same American media where attention was restricted to mortality and casualty rates among American soldiers (Shabout, 2010).

---

them while they were naked, placing a dog chain around their necks, rape, and taking photographs of dead Iraqi detainees (Iraq Prison Abuse Scandal, 2013)

<sup>167</sup> Derogatory stereotypes and their role in inferiorizing Arabs and Arab Americans are examined throughout the thesis. They are particularly explored in Chapter One, Section "Arab American Literature: Characteristics, Themes, and Phases" (p. 17), in Chapter Two, Section "Racism Against Arab Americans" (p. 59), in Chapter Three, Section "War Poetry and the Crisis of Iraq" (p. 167), and in Chapter Four, Section "Mohja Kahf's Asexualized Oriental Women" (p. 233).

Poems on the 9/11 attacks and the devastating subsequent war on Iraq in 2003 are also scrutinized in this chapter under the umbrella of trauma theory. According to Bert Olivier (2008), and Meisenhelder JB and Marcum JP (2008), 9/11 is unarguably an event that qualifies for study from the perspectives of trauma at all levels. However, and as will be revealed through the analysis later, such a violent atmosphere puts the Arab American poets who are the focus of this study in an awkward situation. America's War on Terror following the 9/11 attacks and the targeting of Iraq comprise a threat to the two main constructs of their speakers' identity: the Arab and the American, and results in the creation of uneasy situations for the speakers. As is well-known, the 9/11 hijackers were all Arabs sponsored by the al-Qaeda terrorist organization whose founder was the Arab Osama bin Laden. In addition to that, the War on Terror declared the Iraqi regime a sponsor of terrorism and hence of al-Qaeda. These facts alone comprise a threat to the Arab half in the identity of Arab American speakers of this section of the chapter. Another threat is rooted in the United States itself. This threat is in the frenzy following the attacks, creating social or cultural trauma. This was gradually transformed into prejudice, manifesting itself in hate-crimes against any Americans of Middle Eastern heritage in general, and against Arab Americans in particular, in response to the dreadful 9/11 attacks (Jenkins *et al.*, 2012; Hendricks *et al.*, 2007). Verbal threats such as "damn you Arabs. Go back home and leave us alone," (Hendricks *et al.*, 2007, p. 105) were accepted in a society dominated by media that demonized the 'other' (Hendricks *et al.*, 2007, Welch, 2006; Shirazi, 2010) and hence promoted a culture of hatred against Arabs, Arab Americans, and Easterners alike (Jenkins *et al.*, 2012; Hendricks *et al.*, 2007). In such a jaundiced atmosphere, Arab Americans and the speakers studied in this thesis find themselves trapped and their sense of belonging to either part of their identity (the Arab and the American) threatened (Shirazi, 2010) and their loyalty tested. As "they took a position against the United States' political stance," (Handal, 2001, p. 45) they were subjected to

mainstream prejudice that questioned their loyalty to America and hence they "felt betrayed by many of their fellow Americans" (Handal, 2001, p. 45). In such a context, Arab Americans, the poets studied here and their speakers included, "almost always speak on behalf of Arabs" (Handal, 2001, p. 46).

As a reaction to the above-described American media and negative atmosphere that generally promote hatred towards Arabs, comes the more retaliatory and less objective responses of the Arab American poets who are the focus of this study. It is also a reaction to the angry and prejudiced fight-back of the United States' society at all levels (official and unofficial) against this demonized group "under the name of national security" (Hendricks *et al.*, 2007, p. 96). In this poetry, the four Arab American poets studied here create speakers who take a pan-Arab stance in which they downplay the 9/11 attacks and unveil instead the trauma and the injustice practised by the United States, its society, its politics, and its media against Easterners locally and abroad. According to Nash (2012), Arab American writers in many cases "de-centered the Islamic terrorist threat and attempted to instead account for the events of 9/11 in terms of US activities in the Third World and the Muslim migrants' experience and racist othering in America" (p. 108). When they "de-center", they almost erase from their mind and imagination the trauma of the American people who were terrorized by the attacks and hence feel relaxed even if temporarily only. In other words, those writers practise a form of post-traumatic amnesia (Nash, 2012) that helps them overcome the tension of the moment. Furthermore, blaming the unfair "US activities" in the world for the attacks frees the writers from an expected guilt-feeling that might be caused by the tendency to conflate the Arab identity of the attacker with the Arab half in the identity of the Arab American writers.

Although retaliatory and biased, it can be given another explanation from the perspectives of trauma. According to Stocks (2007), in the process of psychological growth

after trauma, and in order to reduce stress and achieve self-integrity, the stressed-out person may “veil” (p. 74) or shut off the cause of that stress. As has been explained earlier, the Arab American context has never been as threatening to the Arab Americans and Middle-Easterners as in the post 9/11 era. The poetry’s deletion of scenes of the 9/11 attacks, along with its almost oblivious attitude toward the trauma of the American people and society after the horrendous attacks, are acts of shutting off or veiling. They are veiled by the Arab American poets so that their speakers can outlive the threatening situation and retain a sense of balance. They do indeed choose to “steer clear of anything that reminds” (Allen, 2005, p. 3) them or their readers of the attacks as they hit America and only focus on how these attacks have wronged Arab Americans, Arabs, and Easterners in general.

It is with the alarming call “The fires have begun. The fires have begun,” that the speaker begins the poem “The Fires Have Begun” (Kahf, 2003, p.84)<sup>168</sup> which is dated 2011 in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. This call, which is also the poem’s refrain as well as its title, anticipates trouble and pain but only through allusion:

There is a World Love Center inside my ribcage

There is a World Hate Center inside me too

The fires have begun. The fires have begun,

And I don’t know which one

Is going to crumble first (“The Fires”)

Her heart has disappeared and in its place are two clashing powers “Hate” and “Love” that are as strong in their presence as two gigantic towers. The subsequent “fires” are the natural outcome of this clash. Certainly, the allusion in “World [...] Center” in the poem is a reference to the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center that were destroyed in the 9-11

---

<sup>168</sup> Hereafter “The Fires”.

attacks. The alarming effect of the scene is heightened by the speaker's cry "the fires have begun" repeated twice to produce tension. Her seemingly uncertain "I don't know which one/ Is going to crumble first" asserts the inevitable conclusion: the falling of both towers in her "ribcage". Through her analogy, this speaker turns the twin towers that were destroyed by the 9-11 attacks into the symbols that stand for antithetical feelings. Her analogy captures the confusion the tragedy has created, particularly for Arab Americans who were trapped in the middle knowing not where to put their feelings. For Arab Americans, 9-11 was about their own people attacking their own people. It meant double trauma hence the confused emotions of the speaker. However, the poem remains silent about who exactly was to blame and with whom one should sympathize. Additionally, nowhere in the poem do we have images of people throwing themselves out of the windows, or images of the jets colliding with the Centers. Such images are veiled or avoided by the speaker and censored by the poet. The poem concerns itself more with the subjective feeling of the speaker and whether it is her love or her hatred that will prevail after the tragedy. It can be argued that in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, this Arab American speaker is present where mainstream United States' media is noticeably absent. She might have deliberately veiled scenes of the 9/11 attacks and of their immediate victims to unveil her own forgotten pain. She retaliates in order to feel strong.

The "fire" of Kahf's speaker as described above is the "rage" of Halaby whose reaction to the USA war on Iraq in the poem "rage" (Halaby, 2012, p. 97)<sup>169</sup> is both an expression of an "unfolded fury" and cynicism about the Americans' reaction to this war, a reaction the speaker chooses to capture when it is "discussed over/ white china plates/ and marinated kebob":

away from my unfolded fury

---

<sup>169</sup> Hereafter "rage".

away from abstract  
visions of war  
and destruction  
away from liberal mothers  
and their intellectual  
outrage financed by  
working husband  
American dollars  
and discussed over  
white china plates  
or marinated kebab" ("rage")

That the War on Iraq is a war against terrorism is absent from, or veiled in, "rage" above, and what is unveiled or "unfolded" is the speaker "fury" because a war is waged by the USA against an Arab country. For her this war is "abstract" and it means only "destruction." Her tone, which is declaratively angry in the beginning of the poem, grows to be cynical at the poem's end. Amidst her anger, this speaker fails to interpret any humanitarian reaction by US citizens to War on Iraq but as the gimmicky snobbish behavior of the superiors who own "American dollars" and "china plates" before they set to discuss the misery of the poor Iraqis. The juxtaposition of images of the "marinated kebab," of gimmicky "liberal" and of "intellectual" American "mothers" and "husbands," is meant to emphasize the arrogance of those who, for the speaker, pretend to be interested in helping the Iraqis. For her, it is ironic that the misery of the Iraqi people is discussed by the wealthy citizens of the country which itself is the cause of this misery. She tries to convey the feeling that there is something inconsiderate, even inhumane, in seeing US citizens enjoying the delicacy of "marinated kebab" on "china plates" while also chatting about devastated Iraqis in such a setting. What

makes things worse is that “kebob,” which is the pride of Iraqi cuisine, is eaten here by those whose government is crushing that pride overseas. In this gastronomical “kebob” image is a suggestion of the dominant-subordinate relationship in which the Iraqi cuisine or the Iraqis themselves are not only sabotaged by the colonial power in their Iraqi land but are also crushed and consumed by these powerful citizens in the United States.

Noticeably there is again a deliberate deletion, or veiling, of what caused this war in the first place, and where the possibility of a humanitarian reaction by the American public to this war is present, this possibility is again veiled to give the way to an interpretation that sees in this reaction a haughty American disdain. Gradually, the poem’s imagery and tone overflow with edgy feeling and the sceptical reaction of Halaby’s speaker, not forgetting the early suggestion of extreme anger in the title of the poem “Rage”. The poem is retaliatory in the sense that it deforms the image of the white hands of the Americans and tries to stain these hands with the blood of the Iraqis. Each time they dip their hands in the marinade, they are ritually ravaging Iraq. But retaliatory as it may be, it is the Arab American speaker’s means to take her revenge by propagating an unfavorable image of Americans, an image that is absent from the media.

It is worth noting here that in her introduction to *19 Varieties of Gazelle* (2002) Nye urges Middle-Easterners and Arab Americans to offer a collective apology “twice as clearly as anyone else” for the misery caused by people of Arab origin (“Introduction”, Nye, 2002, p. xvi-xvii). Yet nowhere does Nye through her speakers offer such an apology in a straightforward manner. In fact, she avoids calling the 9/11 attacks by their name, even more, she avoids using the adjective “terrorist” to describe the attacks as they have always been described by the media. Instead, Nye resorts to the use of descriptions that euphemize the reference like the “hideous day,” or “the day felt sickeningly tragic” and ironically urges an unequivocal remembrance of the “innocent citizens of the Middle East who haven’t

committed any crime” and those “who have been through so much already” (“Introduction”, Nye, 2002, p. xvi-xvii). This shift of focus from the misery of the current American moment to the misery of the distanced Arab one, albeit humanitarian, may sound untimely and contextually inappropriate. However, what Nye and her speakers are doing is to use the veil-unveil defense mechanism to be able to compose themselves amidst the jaundiced American atmosphere of the post-9/11 era. They veil the terrorist attacks to reduce their damaging psychological and physical effects, and unveil the misery of a group of people, Middle-Easterners and Arab Americans, who have been subjected to collective, yet unacknowledged, threat and hatred following the attacks. By doing this, both the poet and her speakers draw the attention of the reader to the other side of the story that is left unseen and ignored.

In a similar yet more equivocal manner, and forgetful of the American victims of the attacks, the speaker of “Interview” gets more emotionally involved with the Arabs when she calls for sympathy with the hijackers:

There is *no way*, says his brother,  
he could fly a plane.  
The fathers blink back tears.  
They have no evidence at all.  
Please tell them something better.  
Their sons went to school,  
were normal, good. (“Interview”)

The suggestion that the convicted hijacker, whose act has already caused a worldwide trauma, “could” not “fly a plane”, is itself astounding to both the USA media and society even if this suggestion is not substantiated but is merely suggested by an emotional family member. But in reporting this suggestion in her speech, Nye’s speaker creates doubt and even weakens the story of “the unbelievable, senseless sorrow caused by people from the Middle



East” of Nye’s introduction to *19 Varieties of Gazelle* (2002) commented on above. That is simply because if the hijacker “could” not “fly a plane” he consequently cannot be the Middle Easterner who caused “the unbelievable, senseless sorrow” (“Introduction”). As if the speaker of “Interview” intends to elicit audience’s sympathy, she captures the “tears” of the “fathers” and continues to portray the hijacker as an innocent being who leads a “normal, good” family life. The transition from the usage of the singular subjects to the use of plurals is remarkable. In the beginning of the poem, the story is that of one of the hijackers being told by his own brother. But soon, as the speaker begins to pluralize her references to narrate the brother’s story, the story of one of the hijackers becomes the collective story of all hijackers. So now they (i.e. the hijackers) are the “sons” of the fathers-in-tears, they “went to school/ were normal, good”, you could see them somewhere “in short white pants/ [...] walking proudly/ in a world they love”, or peeling “oranges by hand,” or “frying onions,/ marbles in dust” (“Interview”). This shift could be a sign of solidarity or communal feeling Middle Easterners need in order to heal the injuries caused by the enraged antagonizing post-9/11 atmosphere of the United States. The one brother thinks all other hijackers are not guilty. The one brother knows that all fathers are sorry. The reader now descends from the hijacked sky to the domestic, cosy homes of the hijackers. There, the convicts are transformed into carefree and lively students who wear “short white pants” the Western way, and who are only capable of “lov”-ing and cooking. If no one else is ready to humanize the dehumanized hijackers, the Arab American speaker is ready to take the lead necessary for breaking, or at least for slowing down, the cycle of violence that disturbed the world in general and Arab Americans and Middle Easterners in particular. The poem above narrates the story from the perspective of the families of the hijackers, a perspective that is ignored by the media. Though it might not suit a society that is still recovering from the attacks and might even sound inconsiderate, it is one that the speaker, Arabs, and Arab Americans need to consider

in order to recover part of their lost humanity and to gradually regain their power. Another reading of “Interview” is also possible. It is one that sees in the poem’s emotional family setting and its innocent domestic imagery an attempt to invalidate, though in an indirect way, the entire 9/11 story of the nineteen guilty hijackers.

“taking a moment to thank our sponsors” (Halaby, 2012, pp. 110-111)<sup>170</sup> is another poem that raises doubts about America’s reaction to the 9/11 attacks and questions the channel, or the “umbilical cord” that fed and is still feeding America with false news that connects Iraq with these attacks. Enraged by the Abu Ghraib prison scandal, the Arab American speaker of the poem denies any ties between the Abu Ghraib prisoners, the dominant characters in the poem, and terrorism. “our sponsors” poses questions like Why are those Iraqis imprisoned? and Why is there a war against Iraq in the first place? The poem is a warning that something has gone missing:

never mind that there is no umbilical cord  
attaching this country  
this war  
this stack of men, hooded, leashed, posed  
to the nineteen men  
shaved and clean  
who staked the planes (“our sponsors”)

The speaker’s seemingly carefree interjection “never mind” is uttered to cynically question the horrendous practices against Iraqis who are not connected in any possible way “to the nineteen” hijackers most of whom were Saudi. The graphic images of the “hooded, leashed, [and] posed” Iraqi prisoners who were tortured and humiliated by the American prison guards

---

<sup>170</sup> Hereafter “our sponsors”.

are recalled to shock and to confront the world with a moral dilemma. That is because ethically speaking, the Iraqis, whether imprisoned or not, are neither the hijackers nor the offspring of the hijackers, and they were not born from the same womb or fed through the same “umbilical cord” that fed the hijackers. So, there is no real tie between those poor Iraqis and the Saudi “shaved clean” hijackers. Why then should American revenge be exacted against the offspring of Iraq when the mother of terror is non-Iraqi? Negative answers to these questions strongly suggest that America’s new baby: “this war,” or the war on Iraq, is indeed a bastard and so are all its subsequent events, or rather, scandals.

To cast more doubt over America’s war on terror in Iraq, the speaker of “our sponsors” contemptuously criticizes American media for being manipulative of people’s feelings. For the speaker of the poem, the CNN’s repetitive display of the disgraceful photos of the Iraqi Abu Ghraib’s prisoners is no more than the profitable act of “advertising” something at “prime-time” in a “digital” way, all done at the expense of human dignity. To create an atmosphere of disgust, reminiscent of that which CNN creates every time it airs the photos, the speaker resorts to graphic imagery in which the prisoners of Abu Ghraib are turned into humiliated commodities at the disposal of the American guards:

CNN is advertising dark meat  
Stacked in a heap  
a prime-time display of flesh  
never to be sold at Safeway  
a humiliated stack  
of military training  
gone digital (“our sponsors”)

The Iraqi prisoners are the “meat” and the “flesh” and thus the dehumanized things ready to “stack” for display purposes. This “meat”, however, does not meet the standards of American

shoppers so it will not “be sold at Safeway”. It is there to entertain the gaze of the onlookers and satisfy their superior taste of victory over Iraqis. Overall, the scene is created in a way that recalls slavery to the mind of the audience as part of the United States’ history before the Civil War (1861–1865). The prisoners are the slaves. The guards are the white slave-masters. The inhumane Abu Ghraib is a replica of a slave market where prisoners are displayed like slaves who were once auctioned exactly like commodities. Shocking as they may be, these images are meant to narrate the story of the prisoners in a way that has been ignored by the manipulative media when the scandal first took place. Even if in some rare occasions the media shows sympathy towards Iraq or the Iraqi people, for the speaker, this sympathy is only to coat with sugar the sour deeds of the American troops:

    this is what’s underneath  
    the candy-coated hatred  
    whose crinkly wrapping has ripped apart  
    in this Disney paper torn  
    its Hollywood tissue in the shreds on the floor  
    its evangelical dye in a puddle  
    surrounding a man on a leash (“our sponsors”)

From this speaker’s perspective, the US media’s talk about freedom is jingoistic. Underneath this seemingly sweet talk is “candy-coated hatred” wrapped in “Disney paper” and “Hollywood tissue” (“our sponsors”). This talk is shiny from the outside but is rotten deep inside. In her essay “Images and Status: Visualizing Iraqi Women,” (in Shirazi, 2010, p. 161) Nada Shabuot (2010) writes about this tendency in US mainstream media to twist, or, to use the speaker’s metaphor, coat with candy, the truth about the humanitarian crisis in Iraq when American troops are involved in inhumane practices. According to Shabout (2010), the USA media’s interest after the photos of Abu Ghraib and other Iraqi places were aired was on what

will happen to those Iraqis, particularly Iraqi women, “photographed, in a society of honor-killing and strict traditions” (Shabout, 2010, p. 161). The allusions to the USA’s entertainment industry “Disney” and “Hollywood” are meant to highlight the role of the mass media in promoting negative stereotypes about Arabs and Middle Easterners alike and hence making an act of “hatred” (“our sponsors”), like that of the Abu Ghraib’s prison, acceptable by American viewers. In an interview with Jack Shaheen (Curtiss and Hanley, 2001) after the release of his book *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* (2001), Shaheen describes how Hollywood deliberately circulates “ugly images” (Curtiss and Hanley, 2001, p. 103) of Arabs. He says, “in an age when the U.S. government fights offensive stereotypical images for every other group, Arab and Muslim stereotypes seems to be ignored—or even encouraged” (Curtiss and Hanley, 2001, p. 103). He also adds that “[r]epeating something over and over is a common teaching tool [...] and bombarding viewers with the bad Arab theme and image creates a never-ending stream of prejudice. Repulsive images boost more images” (Curtiss and Hanley, 2001, p. 104). So, it is not only the stereotypes, but the uncritical repetition of these stereotypes that is offensive and humiliating. This repetition has taught average Americans the lessons they need about bad Arabs who, for those average viewers, deserve what happens to them at the hands of American troops in Iraq. Facts like these, which the Arab American speaker of “our sponsors” is aware of, influence her cynical tone and her mistrust of American troops in Iraq.

If mass media and entertainment business provided American troops with the cover they needed to commit an atrocity like Abu Ghraib, “evangelical” religion has provided them with another cover too, the speaker suggests (“our sponsors”). It can be argued that the reference which she makes to the “evangelical” pretext is a reference to what George W. Bush did in calling the mission of the American troops following the 9/11 attacks a “crusade” (Welch, 2006, p. 55) hence justifying it on religious grounds. The last line which portrays “a

man on a leash” is a literal description of the photos of Abu Ghraib in which “guards forced prisoners to crawl like dogs on their hands and knees, to bark on command, and to follow their captors on leashes or strings” (Brower, 2004, pp. 1361-62). The poem’s juxtaposing of these deplorable images of Iraqis with entertainment American media’s businesses like CNN, Disney, and Hollywood shows the big gap between the interests of both people, the Iraqis and the Americans. This juxtaposing contrasts a carefree lifestyle that is centered round media channels and businesses with one that is immersed in misery and torturing.

In line with the theme of “our sponsors” is the theme of “He Said EYE-RACK” by Nye (2005, p. 59)<sup>171</sup> which is also concerned with American hypocrisy and ignorance when it comes to war in Iraq. The poem suggests that it is the war of the ignorant and the unlearned against the land of the sophisticated Mesopotamian civilization. This is one possible meaning the poem has, starting from its very title which satirizes George W. Bush’s mispronunciation of the name of the country he is waging a war against. His mispronunciation could be seen as the first act of plundering America practised against Iraq during the Bush Administration; one that will be followed by many others. This Bush is in fact the speaker of “EYE-RACK”, a benevolent narcissist who “blast[s] tree[s], crush[es] carts[s]” and ruins the Iraqi land and sky to “liberate” Iraqis:

Relative to our plans for your country,  
we will blast your tree, crush your cart,  
stun your grocery.  
  
Amen sisters and brothers,  
give us your sesame legs,  
your satchels, your skies.

---

<sup>171</sup> Hereafter “EYE-RACK”.

Freedom will feel good  
to you too. ("EYE-RACK")

The speaker's sense of arrogance and superiority prevails in the poem. The possessive pronouns in the line "*our* plans for *your* country" [my emphasis] put the Americans in the superior position of the benefactor while placing the Iraqis in that of the beneficiary. And as the poem continues, the reader discovers that the American plans to benefit Iraqis under the Bush administration are to pillage Iraq and the Iraqis. The allusion the lines make to Operation Iraqi Freedom, the name given to the American military campaign against Iraq during the Bush 2003 administration, is to mock that operation which mission is to "blast", "crush", and "stun" Iraqi "grocery", "sesame", and "skies". Worse still is the speaker's suggestion that the Iraqis should accept that pillaging as a benevolent American act that "will feel good" eventually. Additionally, as the line "Amen sisters and brothers" meant to satirize itself, it also alludes to "the new American purpose" (Carroll, 2004, p.14) in the war on Iraq. This purpose is to declare the American war a sacred war, or a "crusade," (Carroll, 2004, p.14) against the Iraqis. A declaration that is as equally plunderous as Bush's mispronunciation of the word Iraq.

In "Snowfall on the Colossal Ruins" (Kahf, 2003, p. 79),<sup>172</sup> Kahf's speaker takes over and elaborates upon the so-called USA freedom plans and the consequence of these plans on the Iraqis. A tragic sense prevails in this poem which is about the Iraqi refugees in Jordan. The tragedy lies in the irony that the Bush recipe for freedom in Iraq results in the destruction of this country, the dispersal of its people, and the erosion of its heritage. Visual images of fatigued and hungry Iraqis who were "trained/ in the construction of buildings and poems" and who are now reduced to almost nothing "in the Roman coliseum in Amman," reinforce

---

<sup>172</sup> Hereafter "Snowfall"

the poem's tragic sense. The tragedy is also seen in these once cultivated people of the ancient Mesopotamian culture seeking refuge in one of the edifices of civilization: The Roman Theatre, escaping from the plunder and the deadly practices of the American troops. Iraqi engineers are not renovating or restoring the coliseum, neither are Iraqi poets performing on its stage, they are there fighting poverty "wrapped around a crate of unsold chewing gum/ [...] coughing/ in the air of [...] winter" ("Snowfall"). This humiliation is traumatizing to the already devastated Iraqis, who are the speakers in these poems, as well as to the poets themselves. Michael Welch (2006) and Elizabeth Ferris (2008) believe that what happened to Iraqis is the expected consequence of the America's 2003 Operation Iraqi Freedom which, for them as for my speakers, is a manifestation of America's "displaced aggression" (Welch, 2006, p. 34). The eradication of Iraqi minds, lives, and culture is another natural consequence of the war on Iraq, a consequence to which American mainstream media turns a blind eye (Ferris, 2008). What the poets are doing through their speakers here is drawing the attention of the readers to that unfortunate consequence which went forgotten. The speakers of the poems could also be simply retaliating for the bias their people in the Arab world are enduring because of everything American. In other words, if the American media has forgotten about the poets' and the speakers' misery, and if American troops are looting Iraq's heritage and the Iraqis, the Arab American poets will stand in solidarity with Iraq and the Iraqis against America through their poetry even if in their solidarity they might be no less biased than the Americans.

Similar uncompromising, almost biased, interpretations of Americans' reactions towards the war on Iraq is present in most of the following poems by Halaby whose Arab American speakers are always apprehensive, and almost contemptuous, of everything American even if it is an American philanthropic act. For another Halaby's Arab American speaker, US demonstrations against the war in Iraq are "to voice dissent/ and have a good



walk,” (“demonstrators”, Halaby, 2012, pp. 101-102)<sup>173</sup>. If they demonstrate for the Other poor, it is to exercise their American muscles. If they write “Mont Blanc” petitions, it is to exercise their “penmanship” in a designer way (“penmanship”, Halaby, 2012, pp. 95-96)<sup>174</sup>. Petitions are there to feed US citizens’ own self-esteem and to aggrandize them even more. They have the power to start the war and the control over how and when to end it, the poems suggest. Whether to start or to end a war is at the tip of their designer pens and is a decision they make “over/ white china plates/ of marinated kebob” (“rage”) in their cosy American homes. An exaggerated sense of disgust that “spit[s]” on, mocks and annihilates Americans’ good intentions supersedes the humanitarian context, a sense that confuses the speaker herself: “I see her anger is genuine/ perhaps a reflection of my own/ her designer words/ make me want to spit” (“rage”). The speaker obviously fails to appreciate anything American even the genuine and kind intentions of Americans. For a speaker like Halaby’s above, an American philanthropist might be honest but neither neutral or blameless enough to be applauded.

Paranoid reception of American actions is present in the reaction of an Arab American who wishes to “spit” on those American do-gooders in “rage” in spite of this speaker’s admission that these Americans’ “anger is genuine” (Halaby, 2012, p. 97). Similar reaction exists also in “intentions” (Halaby, 2012, pp. 103-105)<sup>175</sup>. In this poem the speaker is completely in the grip of her negative emotions. The paranoid speaker of “intentions” makes guesses, reads, reacts, and exits a playground with her child without exchanging a single word with the American man who is the source of her paranoid attitude. In “intentions”, an Arab American mother, who is the speaker of the poem, and an American father, who once

---

<sup>173</sup> Hereafter “demonstrators”.

<sup>174</sup> Hereafter “penmanship”.

<sup>175</sup> Hereafter “intentions”.

served in the military overseas, meet in a children's playground. On seeing the man, the speaker is soon to recall his soldier-self and bring it to the foreground, necessarily deleting his humane-self and gradually turning a peaceful playground into a metaphorical battlefield. In spite of the man's politeness and silence, the mother suffers a panic attack, or rage, that she "feel[s] fingers/ probing for [her] heart/ or blood/ or soul" ("intentions"). The fear or the rage of this speaker could be the culminating effect of the post-9/11 era as explained in the poems before. However, nowhere in this poem does the American ex-soldier help to prove the speaker right about her fears. On the contrary, when her child falls down "head over heels/ he gently picks up/[the] sobbing child/ holds him tightly" and chaperones him till the child reaches the mother. Her cynicism, her silence, and her ingratitude to the American man are all turned against her when the man leaves "watching, smiling/ [...] but with satisfaction/ like someone who just climbed a mountain/ because it was there" ("intentions"). He is the climber, and she is the mountain. Opposite to the speaker's wish that in ignoring the ex-soldier she will win her angry Arab self a victory, it is America, manifested now in this ex-soldier, that wins a victory over the Arab American speaker and conquers the moment.

"The Fires" (Kahf, 2003, p. 84), "rage", "Introduction" (Nye, 2002, p. xvi-xvii), "Interview", "our sponsors", "EYE-RACK", "Snowfall", "demonstrators", "penmanship", and "intentions" offer a reading of the consequence of the 9/11 attacks from an angle that has received little or no positive attention by America and the Americans. It is a reading from the perspectives of Iraqis and the Arabs. As has been shown earlier, there is a tendency in all these poems to delete the stories and the trauma of the American 9/11's immediate victims and to focus instead on the marginalized victims of America in the Arab world, particularly in Iraq. These poems question the "savior" ("our sponsors") image America projects of itself, and promote instead an image of America that is disturbing. According to Cho (2008) and Shirazi (2010) this "savior" image has always been propagated by American mainstream

media during not only the War on Iraq, but also in previous wars such as the Korean War, the War in Vietnam, and the War in Afghanistan. The poems try to tell the world that if two towers collapsed in Lower Manhattan on the 11th of September 2001, two thousand years of civilization in Iraq have collapsed and is still collapsing as a result of the American-led military intervention in Iraq. Other innocent people elsewhere are also paying for mistakes they did not commit in the first place. These poems recall, from collective amnesia, the pain of the forgotten and try to create a sense of equilibrium that gives innocent human beings and their land and civilization a chance to be treated fairly.

### **Conclusion**

The brutality of war, violent conflicts and terrorism expose humanity to the painful consequences of trauma. When civilians are targeted and families are uprooted to become refugees, destruction and chaos predominate to create long-lasting pain and PTSDs. The aim of this chapter was to provide an understanding of war trauma and its impact on both female and male speakers from different age-groups as they are affected by, and interact with, the different war scenes portrayed in the war poetry written by the four Arab American women poets who are central to this study. Throughout this chapter, we have seen mothers and fathers who have survived the atrocities of war yet go on to experience its consequences many years after the war is over. In their old age, Sitti, aunt Azzizy, and the Skaff mother suffer from separation anxiety following the loss of their dear ones. Similarly, the Palestinian father, the Skaff boys, and Abu Mahmoud suffer because of the loss even in their safe havens elsewhere. The elders among the speakers of war poetry here employ coping strategies that help them survive while managing to keep their emotional balance. The mothers nurture their pain along with their children through praying, through clinging to hope, and through survival war itself as a triumph. The fathers are stubborn in their hope of a better coexistence between the opposing sides of the conflict. Abu Mahmoud and the Skaff boy create their own

motherland and mother surrogates to cope with PTSD. Additionally, nowhere in the poems do these mothers and fathers demonstrate furious rage against the opponent. Unlike the younger speakers in the poems of war, retaliation is not part of the rhetoric of the older speakers of war poetry whose tone remains almost peaceful in spite of their painful experiences.

The younger generation of speakers who also experiences trauma has its own ways of overcoming its worries and fears resulting from wars or conflicts. Wars in the Arab world, as the discussion has shown, greatly busy and influence the thoughts of these younger speakers. Unlike the older speakers of the poetry of war, this younger generation may resolve its tragic experiences in some dramatic ways such as extreme expressions of anger and the renunciation of the divine, but it may also resort to hope and optimism as means of healthy growth and survival. For reasons explained in the course of this chapter, it is the 9-11 attacks and the subsequent American invasion of Iraq that provide the backdrop for the poetry of war which is sung by the younger speakers. These speakers consider the destruction of Iraq and the atrocities befalling its people a crime committed mainly by the country they belong to: the United States. Reactions in the United States following the 9-11 attacks, mostly seen as biased reactions by the young speakers, traumatize the speakers and provide the inspiration for the poetry which is studied in this chapter. Their ambivalence concerning with whom to align themselves is resolved in what I labeled a retaliatory reaction. Witnessing American bias and aggression against the Arab world and against Iraq following the 9-11 attacks, the young speakers retaliate by ignoring the dilemma of the American people in the wake of the attacks and focus instead on the consequences of these attacks on the Arabs, even on the families of the hijackers. What they see as an aggressive American reaction towards the attacks is returned by equally aggressive censoring by the speakers of the tragedy as it befell

the Americans. In this sense, the younger speakers differ drastically from the older ones who are more likely to display non-violent reactions.

## Chapter Four

### Poetry and the Expression of the Intimate

“Your lips are dark, my love,

and fleshy, like a date

[...]

Grant but one taste — one kiss!”

(“A Man’s Chest”, Kahf, 2013, no page)

#### Introduction

The expression of the intimate indicates this chapter’s involvement with the analysis of the poetry that is spoken by women who are involved in heterosexual relationships beyond and within the intimacy of sex.<sup>176</sup> That is to say, this chapter is interested in the exploration of the existing love patterns and in finding the relationship between these patterns and the speaker’s expressivity about her body and the autonomy of her sexual choices. It is also interested, particularly when discussing the poetry of Mohja Kahf, in showing that the many choices a woman makes, such as going erotic or wearing the hijab, are empowering of the woman but not degrading. It will be obvious in this chapter that among the speakers of the four Arab American poets I study here, Kahf’s are the most dominating. They engage explicitly with love, with their bodily desires, and with their rights in general including the ones to free sexual choices. In fact, in the absence of Nye’s poetry which remains silent regarding women’s intimacy, the discussion of Kahf’s poetry occupies almost two-thirds of this chapter, and the poetry of Abinader and Halaby occupies one-third of it only. While choosing to tackle intimate topics could be a mere personal choice by the poets, it could also be an indication of Kahf’s speakers’ stronger expressivity in terms of their intimacy and rights, and

---

<sup>176</sup> In choosing the title of this chapter, I am inspired by Lambert-Hurley, S.’s (2014) article “To Write of the Conjugal Act: Intimacy and Sexuality in Muslim Women’s Autobiographical Writing in South Asia”.

consequently proving that when it comes to their own intimate rights, women speakers tend to be more silent than not.

The analysis undertaken in this chapter assumes that the weaker the intimate relationship the speaker is involved in, the less interested that speaker is in expressions about her intimate and passionate needs, and the more alienated she is from her body, particularly her sexualized body. Contrastingly, the more dominant in love is a woman speaker, the more she is expressive about her sexuality and her sexual choices, and the more articulate she is about her sexualized body. To give an early explanation of this, I will use the poetry of love by Abinader and Halaby as an example and compare it to that of Kahf. As will be seen later, in the poetry of Abinader and Halaby, the speakers are involved in a fragile love. Such fragility results in eclipsing passion from the poetic scene and in the removal of any discourse on women's bodily desires or their sexual choices. Contrasting with these speakers are Kahf's whom I call thorough or the complete. They are thorough in the sense that they are in harmony with their follies and their successes. Whether they are Kahf's contemporary women speakers or her ancient speakers from the realm of literary tradition and mythology, they are empowered and are masterly in talking about their passion. Their bodies and their bodies' sexual desires are not only acknowledged but are celebrated and prioritized by these speakers. Kahf's speakers have nothing to worry or be shy about. They are complete and are satisfied with themselves. They do not only embark, steadfastly, on the shore of love, but are themselves the dominant figures in this relationship and the sole masters of their own sexuality and the sexuality of their partners. Having achieved a level of self-satisfaction with her contemporary speakers, Kahf resorts to literary and cultural tradition to empower other women across history. In fact, in her scheme of empowerment, Kahf resurrects women characters from the ancient East. These are Scheherazade, traditionally known as the diva of sensual storytelling, Ishtar, the Mesopotamian mythological diva of passion and war, and the

divas of exoticized sex, the Odalisques.<sup>177</sup> She does this to give those divas a stage to have their voices heard and their characters as women redefined on more liberal and unbiased bases.

Certainly, in an Arab American context one cannot avoid bringing the bicultural background of the poets to the table of discussion to explain the distinctive attitude the poets' representative speakers have towards women's passion, sexuality, and women's overall autonomous choices. This distinction could be dictated by two things: the bicultural fact and the extent to which these poets and their representative speakers assimilate to American society while maintaining their Arab identity. To explain this, I will take Roberta L. Coles' (2016) definition of biculturalism and provide a possible interpretation of the poets' and their speakers' varying attitudes towards women's private issues. Coles (2016, p. 291) defines biculturalism as the extent to which "individuals maintain some of the old and adopt some of the new." By "old" and "new" she means the cultures one belongs to. In the case of the poets who are the focus of this thesis, the "old" is the Arab and the "new" is the American. Excluding Nye for the reasons mentioned above, each of the other three poets maintains the "old" and "new" dichotomy in her own way. Inevitably, newcomers to foreign societies try to assimilate to these societies' norms. Assimilation however is not a straightforward monolithic process but is rather a "complex pattern of continuity and change" (Berry, 1997 as cited in Coles, 2016, p. 290). As one acquires the "new", the "old" remains in the background to some degree. An equilibrium in the new-old dichotomy can be seen in Kahf's speakers who adopt the "new" liberal Western values while adhering to their "old" root heritage. By these liberal values I mean a woman's expressivity about her love, body, and sexuality. These are

---

<sup>177</sup> Detailed discussion of Scheherazad, the Odalisques, and Ishtar is provided in the introduction of this chapter and in the Sections entitled "The Confident, Passionate Women of Mohja Kahf" (p. 215) and "Mohja Kahf's Asexualized Oriental Women" (p. 233) respectively.



empowering values of Kahf's speakers that enable them to be the dominating players in the sexual act and the sole liberators of themselves and of women across history. In addition to their liberal behaviors, Kahf's speakers are equally proud of their "old" Eastern heritage. Their cultural pride in their roots is seen in the metaphors they use in which they associate Eastern places and personages with a woman speaker's autonomy in sexuality. In Kahf's poetry of passion, the glory of Yemen and Baghdad, for instance, is equal to the speaker's triumph in love and sex. Additionally, Kahf's evocation of Scheherazad, Ishtar, and the Odalisques is to re-establish these Eastern mythological divas on liberal values that enables them to be free and masters of their concept of sexuality, and to also redefine them as proud icons from the "old" East who are ready to embrace the "new" West. This harmonious coexistence of "old" and "new" values enriches the experience of Kahf's women speakers and uplifts their egos.

Compared to Kahf's, Abinader's and Halaby's speakers are disturbed, unconfident, and unable to maintain the "old"- "new" worlds equilibrium Kahf's speakers maintain and hence their love is doomed and their sexual desires, if present, are denied. Their "old" Arab or non-American world experiences seem to inhibit the progress of their love story in America which is their "new" world. Halaby's speakers are disturbed because in their "new" world they choose untrustworthy lovers who resemble them and originate from the "old" world. This choice limits the speakers' other more liberal options that would afford them with a different love story and the possibility of starting an explicit, harmonious relationship with their bodies as women. And when it comes to Abinader's speakers, it is sometimes images of suicide and decay which they recall from their "old" world that affect their conception of love and intimacy in the United States. In many cases, this tension between the two worlds throws the speakers of Halaby and Abinader into an ailing emotional relationship where bodily desires are absent.

Another reason why Kahf's speakers are the most dominating and daring here is that Kahf is directly involved with feminist discourse. In fact, her book *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman: From Termagant to Odalisque* (1999) is meant to smash the biased Western representations of Eastern women, the Muslims among them in particular. As a feminist herself, Kahf is certainly aware of the patriarchal conservatism in the Arab world which holds the woman's body as a source of honor or disgrace. And as an Arab American, she is equally aware of the fact that nothing in the West could challenge stereotypes particularly those pertaining to the Eastern woman who is seen as the voiceless victim of her religion, culture, and man, and who may wear a veil that is "necessarily" oppressive of her (Darraj, 2002; Elia, 2006; Fekete, 2006; Chew, 2009; Tossy, 2015). So, in her endeavor to reconstruct the image of women on fair and correct bases, she uses the power of her poetry to empower women past and present to let her speakers trash the cultural and religious tropes they have been suffering from. As will be soon shown in this chapter, Kahf's poetry that is studied here counter-attacks a West that propagates an image of the Eastern woman as an oppressed woman. She does this through creating Eastern or Muslim speakers who are articulate and outgoing as in "Hijab Scene" series (Kahf, 2003, p. 25; p. 31; p. 39; p. 41; p. 42). She equally counter-attacks a conservative Muslim world when she creates Muslim speakers who are lustful and explicit about their sexual desires as in "A Man's Chest" (2013, no page)<sup>178</sup> and "More than One Way to Break a Fast" (Akash and Mattawa, 1999, p. 263)<sup>179</sup>. In fact, this eroticism, which is always a choice for Kahf's speakers, helps limit the patriarchal hegemony of the female body that has long made women feel "far from being at

---

<sup>178</sup> Hereafter "Man's Chest".

<sup>179</sup> Hereafter "Break a Fast".

home with themselves” (Diprose, 2005, p. 31; Amin, 2017)<sup>180</sup>. As a Muslim writer herself, Kahf could also be resorting to eroticism to eradicate yet another stereotype which suggests that Muslim women writers do not tackle intimate or sexual relationships explicitly in their writings (Stephan, 2006; Mattawa, 2013; Lambert-Hurley, 2014).

Following a review on the place women’s intimate relationships occupy in Western and Eastern cultures, this chapter begins with investigating the poetry of Abinader and Halabi as an example of the disharmonious relationship that can exist between a given speaker and her lover and her own body. The chapter then explores in depth the poetry of Kahf as an ultimate example of a woman’s success in being expressive about her own intimacy and her body whether that body is sexualized or not. While investigating these issues, the chapter examines the reasons behind the failure or the success of the different speakers in being expressive about their own intimate needs as women. Endeavoring to fulfill its goals, this chapter addresses the following questions: To what extent are a woman’s intimate concerns hers to write about and express? What is the distance between a woman and her own body? Do women speakers respond differently to love? How do they respond to love and how does this define their expressivity about their intimacy and their sexualized bodies? How would a feminist Muslim woman be involved in discourse about women’s intimacy? How, through breaking stereotypes, can a woman be empowered and have her sexual choices be recognized? How does the culture and the heritage of a passionate woman speaker play part in empowering women in general?

---

<sup>180</sup> Discussion of men’s monopoly on the passion and the body of the woman is in the next section entitled “Monopolizing Women’s Intimacy” (p. 196).

### **Monopolizing Women's Intimacy**

The absence of a substantial discourse on women's intimate relationships from the poetry of Abinader, Halaby, and Nye is not entirely surprising. For while it is true that the poets and most of their speakers are American, they are Arabs first and foremost and are hence conscious and unconscious heirs to a heritage which remains tinged with the residue of conservatism. In conservative societies, for a woman to write an explicit account about her romantic relationship, or about hers, and other women's, bodily desires and sexuality is deemed an uncomfortable, if not unethical practice (Stephan, 2006; Mattawa, 2013). These are taboo subjects and exposing them to public scrutiny remains sensitive. Stephan (2006) insists that women writers with Middle Eastern origins are still silenced by Islamic and Christian theology which labels a woman writing about love and sexuality as shameless and dishonorable. She adds that while "men, including theologians and politicians wrote volumes on the subject [,]" in most cases, women remain alien to it (Stephan, 2006, p. 162). Stephan (2006) quotes Sabbah (1984), Bouh dib (1985), Malti-Douglass (1991) and Mernissi (1987), who all share her view point about Arabs' restrictions on women writing about love and sensual topics.

We may take the discourse on women's bodies to be as old a story as that of Adam and Eve. Although The Quran which is the holy book of Muslims acquits the woman and lays the blame of the Fall on both Adam and Eve, the latter, according to one verse narrated by the Prophet's disciple Ibn Abbas (qtd. in AlDebayyan nd.), bequeathed eternal bodily suffering to women. In Islamic heritage, God has punished womankind after both Adam and Eve ate from the forbidden tree by letting Eve suffer during pregnancy and by making her bleed or menstruate two times in each month. The story continues that when Eve sobbed after hearing this, God ordained that the pain and the bleeding will be hers and her female offspring until the day of doom (AlDebayyan. nd. p. 41). With regard to this issue, Christian theology,

which puts the blame of the Fall on Eve, sees in this female “sinner” the disgraceful “body and [...] passion of the flesh” (De Clercq, 2013, p. 54).

In her book *Migrating the Feminine* (2017), Nora Amin, writes about another bodily suffering a woman undergoes when she leaves the domestic realm. Setting herself as an example, she describes the disappointment she feels when the male dance designer made her wear a masculine gown to perform on the stage in Egypt and forbade her from wearing the revealing costumes of the belly dancer. Amin understands that this man is the product of the patriarchal mentality that gives the masculine body the freedom to present itself publicly which is denied to the woman and to her womanly body (Amin, 2017). For Amin, dancing in the public male-dominated sphere is a declaration of the independence of her body, since the masculine guise she is forced to adopt denies her this pleasure. While the gown in which she dances is meant to protect her body from disapproving or unwanted gazes, the woman in her abhors this protection because it is under the hegemony of man. The woman’s body as a source of either honor or shame is also suggested by Fuad Alkhouri (1997) in his book *The Body Ideology: The Symbolism of Chastity and Shame*.<sup>181</sup> According to Alkhouri, while all divine religions prohibit the transgression of the moral code of decency when it comes to the human body, he admits that Islam, in its endeavor to immunize the society against licentiousness, broadens this code and imposes even more restrictions on the woman’s body (Alkhouri, 1997).

Rosalyn Diprose in *Bodies of Women: Ethics, Embodiment and Sexual Differences* (2005)<sup>182</sup> is critical about some Western philosophies in relation to the body of women. Diprose (2005) criticizes Friedrich Nietzsche’s *The Gay Sciences* (1974) because it defines

---

<sup>181</sup> The original title of this Arabic book is [*Idelogia Aljasad: Roumoyzat Altahara wa Alnajasa*].

<sup>182</sup> My paragraph, from this point onward, summarizes information presented in Diprose’s book herein mentioned.

the woman's relationship with her own identity and body as one that must conform to man's conception of the woman's body and as a source of either shame or virtue. Diprose is equally critical of Jacques Derrida's (1979) *Spurs: Nietzsche's Style* where he claims that an ultimate goal to the woman is to understand that she belongs to the man who also owns her body.

However, Moria Gatens's suggestion that "body politics speaks only of one body, one reason, one ethos-one which is isomorphic with the male body" (cited in Diprose 2005, p. 31) agrees with Amin's (2017) and with Diprose's (2005) opinion that in the "public sphere" women are still "far from being at home with themselves or with the public body" (2005). Therefore, one can say that although Ibn Abbas (as cited in AlDebayyan nd., p. 41), Alkhouri (1997), Diprose (2005), Stephan (2006), Amin (2017), and other philosophers come from different backgrounds, they all agree that the woman's body remains an area of controversy.

### **Patterns of Love and the Place of the Woman's Sexualized Body**

When they are in love, Abinader's and Halaby's speakers seem fragile and are incapable of rational thought. Neither of them portrays or experiences true passion, and all the warmth of love gives way to suspicion, instability, and misery. The strange fact is that in many cases these speakers continue in a relationship that ravages them which could be an indication of their need for companionship or to create a relationship that puts an abrupt end to loneliness. Irrational as this might be, loneliness does not seem to be a choice with these women-speakers. On the one hand, Abinader's speaker is almost sure that her partner is continually estranging himself from her yet she is unable to let go of him. "I do not want to be alone [,]" says Abinader's speaker to herself in "What We Leave Behind" when she realizes that she is in fact left "alone" (Abinader, 1999, p. 68)<sup>183</sup>. On the other hand, the speaker's attempt to resume her affair, despite knowing her partner's multiple vices, is obviously futile. Where

---

<sup>183</sup> Hereafter "Leave Behind".

genuine affection is absent, genuine sexual desire dies and love becomes a form of attachment more than a true feeling. In scenes of dysfunctional passion such as those of Abinader's and Halaby's, a discourse which is silent about the body of the woman, or that of the man, is not unexpected but natural.

### **The Passive, Passionate Women of Elmaz Abinader**

“[...] there are  
women's hearts hammered  
metal and love wasted  
on kings/ pharaohs” (“PACKING FOR EGYPT”, Abinader, 2014, pp. 67-  
68)<sup>184</sup>

In her homeland, Lebanon, Abinader's Arab American speaker visits Pigeon Rock which is as monumental as is “a prime destination for desperate, suicidal people, who come to jump from it”<sup>185</sup> (Richa and Richa, 2015, p. 16). Upon seeing this monumental rock, Abinader's speaker is not inspired by its geological formation, as is the usual case with visitors, but is rather contemplative of this rock's association with images of doomed love that end with suicide and death:

No one is standing on Pigeon Rock  
when they show it to me.  
Every story that is told has no names.  
Every story that is told starts

---

<sup>184</sup> Hereafter “EGYPT”.

<sup>185</sup> Richa, Sami and Richa Nathalie, 2015 "Pigeon Cave: A Legendary Place of Suicide in Lebanon." *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 172(1), p. 16. Published Online <http://dx.doi.org/10.1176/appi.ajp.2014.14091134>

with love and ends with dying (“Pigeon Rock”, Abinader, 1999, p. 16)<sup>186</sup>

That “no one is standing on Pigeon Rock” creates a sense of relief to the collective memory of the Lebanese people who have always associated this rock with lovers’ suicide. The Arab American speaker of the poem seems to inherit the same death-stricken memory from her native people. The exciting act of “show”-ing this Arab American visitor a monument in her homeland turns into an act of recalling depression in “[e]very story” there. The intense gloominess of the atmosphere is emphasized through the employment of negation “[n]o one is standing/ [...] no names” and the denial of life to a love that “ends with dying”.

In fact, the speaker’s experience at the Pigeon Rock seems more like an experience of horror than anything else. Her phantasmagoric imagination inspired by the sight of a homeland monument now turns this monument into a charnel house for lovers:

Perhaps the dead lovers dwell  
in the caves beneath and spy  
on small boats as they pass.  
Or perhaps they awaken at night  
and climb back to the top (“Pigeon Rock”)

There is something sinister inherent in the death-tinted scenes above. As if it is not enough for them to have their love doomed and be ended through their suicide, Lebanese lovers are tortured in their after-life; their souls are restless. Pain is eternal in this posthumous image where “they awaken at night/ and climb back to the top” only to throw themselves off this cliff once again. Underlying this “climbing back to the top” is a futile pain which is reminiscent of that of Sisyphus, but whereas in Greek’s mythology Sisyphus’ sin is deceitfulness, that of the lovers in “Pigeon Rock” is love. In their posthumous state they are

---

<sup>186</sup> Hereafter “Pigeon Rock”.



still suspicious, unseen “in the caves beneath” yet paradoxically, they are fearful of being seen. The intense dull imagery we have here deprives love from even the slightest possibility of being a bond of warmth. Rather, it is a sinful bond; a sin that cannot be expiated and a torturous bond that can never be dissolved even by death itself. The rhetorical question “Does it take so much bravery/ to love?” which concludes the poem is the speaker’s delayed climactic confession. For this speaker, love is a battle even the brave cannot survive. This climax does not resolve the apprehensive atmosphere of the poem or the poem’s intense gloominess, but instead leaves the speaker and the reader baffled by this recollection of love that is utterly depressed and depressing.

The foreboding atmosphere of “Pigeon Rock” seems to haunt every love experience in Abinader’s *In the Country of My Dreams* (1999). In this book, the reader continues to meet star-crossed lovers who are submissive to the fact that they “will love and lose again” until their “lives become ruins behind [them]” (“Places We’ve Been, Places We’re Going”, Abinader, 1999, p. 56)<sup>187</sup>. Like the dead lovers of the Pigeon Rock, the lovers in “Places” are also fatigued by their love. In their desperate state, they only remember that their emotional deprivation is multifaceted. It is not only the intimacy of love that they lack, but other sources of spiritual warmth like “god”, “children”, and even “secrets”:

We carry no gods with us. We have no children.

I wait below the mountains for glaciers to send us ages

We will love and lose again. What we have brought

Are the curves of our faces, foreign and erect

And without secret (“Places”)

---

<sup>187</sup> Hereafter “Places”.

The lovers are spiritually empty from within, they “carry no gods”, and barren from without, they “have no children”. Thus, their sense of the togetherness as denoted by the repetitive use of “[w]e” loosens itself to their inside out emptiness and to the dull and cold atmosphere of the setting. The “mountains” of “glaciers” seem as though they are imposed on the scene to reflect the heavy, stationary, and frozen state of the lovers. The grim affirmation that they “will love and lose again” is an expression of the utter hopelessness of their relationship despite their current state of being. In this poem by Abinader, like in the poem before, love is not a privilege and lovers are not privileged. Instead, love creates a state of boredom and despair that accelerates ageing and contracts lovers’ wrinkly “curves” that denote their exhaustion. If their death by suicide estranges the lovers from each other in “Pigeon Rock”, it is their monotonous, static, and boring life that alienates the lovers of “Places” and turns their love into an essentially doomed relationship.

“Sixty Minutes” is yet another sketch by Abinader that portrays love as a futile relationship. In this poem, racial tension is part of the scene where the Arab American speaker confronts her suspicious American lover with his racist perception of herself and of her Arab people. It is not unexpected that mainstream American media feeds this lover’s apprehensive attitude towards his beloved who is the speaker of the poem. Upon watching the news about the unstable Arab world, the lover remembers that his beloved is “an Arab when [he] saw them/ on T.V.” His fear grows:

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,

If I had something behind my back, hidden beneath my clothes (“Sixty Minutes”)

A phobia reminiscent of Islamophobia disturbs the relationship here. In the presence of thoughts about “a suicide pact, [...], [and] a battle plan” love absents itself and gives way to

what I would describe as gothic fear. It is gothic in a sense that it re-situates the beloved in that part of the world where djinni's and sorcery are believed to be prevalent. Her eyes are now "illusion", her "back" and "cloth" fortify hidden evil. There is, obviously, a sudden change in the behavior of the American lover who forgets that his beloved "was born in Pennsylvania" and begins seeing her through the lens of her turbulent and mysterious land. There is no denial that in the context of the poem above the American media plays a central role in shaping the lovers' relationship. That Arab Americans are persistently portrayed as suspicious outsiders is a common American mainstream media's labelling of this minority group (Kulczycki and Lobo, 2001; Haddad, 2004; Salaita, 2005).

Although the covert reaction of the American lover qualifies as racist, it remains within the societal norm which sees in Arab Americans a minority group that is labeled with derogatory perceptions and descriptions. However, the reaction of the Arab American beloved in "Sixty Minutes" is surprising. Her reaction is passive and subdued. She clings to her suspicious American lover and does not let go of him. Forgetful of the change in his behavior, she still sees in them "an act of love", and in spite of his dubious glances after he watches T.V. news, she still thinks that his wandering "eyes [are] searching the crowds/ for [her]" love ("Sixty Minutes"). In nightly stars, she declares, she sees his "thousand eyes" from which glitter she takes "the flames in [her] eyes" ("Sixty Minutes"). The self-delusion this Arab American speaker practises has two functions. First, it props up her self-esteem and uplifts her spirit which is downtrodden by the reaction of her American lover. Second, it suppresses the negative context even if only temporarily in order to enable her to continue in a relationship instead of being left alone. Whether the reader likes it or not, it seems that this speaker's need for a lover or for emotional attachment is stronger than the insult she receives from the context of "Sixty Minutes".

Love as a burden continues to dominate in the poems of Abinader. Haunted by the ghost of impending loneliness following her separation from her lover, the speaker of “Leave Behind” communicates a feeling of fear that engulfs her home and its surrounding:

Winter pushes into my room. I awaken

And walk to the porch. Windows rattle

Threats of falling. Fragments of glass,

Veins of dark wood.

I hold the window still, watch the trees

Struggle in the cold. (“Leave Behind”)

The dull atmosphere, necessarily reinforced by the introduction of an aggressive “Winter” that “pushes into” the room of the forsaken speaker to “awaken” her, could be a projection of the speaker’s exhausted inner in its post-separation state. She feels dejected, “I do not want to be alone” (“Leave Behind”) and is falling apart, and so are her “windows” and the “trees” around her house, all “struggle” and experience “[t]hreats of falling”. The cold “Winter” of the scene is symbolic of this speaker’s sense that she is deprived of warm emotions.

Numbness or emotional desensitization resulting from failure in love characterize the speakers of “The Volcano” (Abinader, 1999, p. 50)<sup>188</sup> “Flowers”, and “Living Without Guatemala” (Abinader, 1999, pp. 54-55)<sup>189</sup>. Confronted by the ebbs and flows of their emotions they try to endure loneliness as calmly as they can. But again, like the other Abinader’s speakers before them, the Arab American speakers here are not decisive about leaving their playful, or cold, lovers behind. On the contrary, each speaker clings to her indifferent lover even when she is certain that he is escaping his love promises. In “Volcano” “Dried Flowers”, and “Guatemala” set in Indonesia, Spain, and Guatemala respectively,

---

<sup>188</sup> Hereafter “Volcano”.

<sup>189</sup> Hereafter “Guatemala”.

similar images of wrecked love are repeated. No land is good enough to function as an abode for the estranged couple. In Indonesia, even the erupting volcano cannot rekindle the fire of a dying love:

And there you are now, in Indonesia, gathering the brimstone  
in your eyes, filling your lungs with smoke. I know how  
it has been the same, always the same through years  
of eruptions and silences. And how you have twisted  
away from me, an insurrection of your own [...] (“Volcano”)

A setting of “brimstone”-s and “smoke” usher in hyper activity; that of a volcano on the verge of eruption. Where we have two lovers and a volcano in sight, it is an expulsion or an outburst of emotions that is expected. However, this expectation is frustrated by the dull, almost repressive tone of the woman speaker who is submissive to their estranged relationship but yet who remains attached to her lover. “I know how/ it has been the same, always the same through years/ of eruptions and silences” is not only a realization of their aimless relationship but also an indication of her indifference, or rather her desensitization towards this realization. This relationship with its repeated failure seems to have turned this woman into a dispirited shadow that can hardly feel. Her emphasis that it has been “always the same” disappointment between the couple is a confession that tastes like a monotonous submission which contrasts with the activity of the surroundings. Like Abinader’s speakers before her, this one is also unable to leave this doomed relationship. While she remains where she is and she clings to her old ways of loving that are futile and aimless, it is he who “twisted away” from her and it is he who has an “insurrection of his own”. The title of the poem and its setting delude the reader into expecting a strong speaker and a strong tone only to discover that the poem’s speaker is dispossessed and submissive.

The speaker of “Dried Flowers” fully realizes that as a couple, she and her lover are already estranged from each other. Unsurprisingly, however, she still contemplates their love and recalls blamelessly their memory together:

What do I do about you now? (I have  
given you a flower.) I walk deep  
into the waters of Valencia and think  
of you pausing on a hillside in Andorra.

And we move on and on separately (“Dried Flowers”)

The content of this stanza is an obvious reply to the speaker’s rhetorical question: “What do I do about you now?” She too should “move on and on” but that is exactly what she cannot do. She contemplates him although she is aware that as a couple their paths diverge: she walks “deep/ into the waters” he “paus[es] on a hillside”. Her walk “deep/ into water” while thinking of him reflects a deeper involvement with her feelings towards the faraway lover. From his standpoint on a “hillside” when she is “deep/ in water”, the lover is surely indifferent towards his beloved’s feelings. He is aloof, up “on a hillside” and she is deep down thinking of the “flower” she gave to him. More emphatic is the concluding line of the stanza: “we move on and on separately”. With these realizations in mind, acknowledged yet ignored, the rhetorical question “What do I do about you now?” and the “flower” reveal a speaker who is intentionally weak. What weakens her could be the one-sided love she nurtures for an estranged lover whom she still contemplates and is attached to. She might be fearful of impending loneliness. The faint thought about her lover may help her overcome this fear even if momentarily only.

In her portrayal of women in love, Abinader is persistent in presenting her speakers in a deplorable condition where they remain attached to what I describe as the phantoms of their lovers who have deserted them. This is obvious even in “Guatemala” where the deserted

speaker falls victim to her imagination of *him* until she gets delirious and begins talking to *his* phantom:

I imagine you, too, sit on porches looking out  
into spring and into summer, remembering  
the promise to return to Guatemala, (“Guatemala”)

It is just too sentimental of the speaker to remember someone who has forgotten his “promise to return” and to recall her memory of him in a picturesque manner where he “sit[-s] on porches looking out/ into spring and into summer”. Ironically, whereas her lines make clear reference to the disavowal of his promise they also emphasize her still soft memory of him. Both “spring” and “summer” memories serve to romanticize that which is unromantic, her thoughtless lover. Her delusional fantasizing about her lover leads her to speak to his phantom and to even forbid him, or rather his phantom, from touching their picture together: “[d]o not put your hand over the picture” and dictates as if she still has a say over their relationship, “this is where we want to be” (“Guatemala”). Her stubborn wish to “want to be” with the absent lover says as much about her attachment to him as it says about her detachment from the reality of their estrangement.

It is clear from the discussion above that Abinader’s women in love endure a limbo-like state where they cannot enjoy the pleasures of love nor can they release themselves from the relationship. The speaker of the poem endures people’s curious questions, including the poems’ audience, about her continuing with a lover who estranged himself from her so that they “live apart now” (“Opposition”). The laconic answer she gives, “Because we can/ is what I tell them” is more a disguise of her denial that they are separated than a revelation of their temporary plan to “live apart”. The speaker of “Opposition” literally lives in an “[o]pposition” in which she is tormented between two antithetical feelings: her realization that they are estranged and her failure to let go of their agonizing love. Still she contemplates

his return and blinds herself to the futility of what she is doing: “I watch for that single/ meteor; the one that plunges you here/ and away again” (“Opposition”). As readers, we again see this speaker dealing with her conflicting feelings amidst her realization of her new status as a forsaken beloved. However, she still fantasizes him and wishes that heaven would bring her lover back on a “meteor”, even though she is sure that this same celestial body will take him “away again” (“Opposition”). In spite of this, she remains the same contemplative and passive speaker similar to Abinader’s other speakers before her.

Abinader’s and her woman speaker’s take on romantic love prove consistent. With them, love has always fallen short of its promise and has floundered. Theirs is a demonstration of a disintegrating relationship in which one of them, the woman, is deluded by her wishful thinking of an emotional revival as if to cure her separation trauma, while the other, the man, moves beyond the futile relationship and finds a new way. These women’s failure to acknowledge their emotional relationship is draining to them and surrenders them to pain.

### **The Aggressive, Passionate Women of Laila Halaby**

Love in the poetry of Halaby is a relationship that compensates for the homeland the speakers are alienated from. As will be shown below, what unites the lovers that Halaby portrays is that they are all men-of-color. In a way, they resemble the Arab American speakers of the poems in the sense that they are non-white or rather more Easterners than Westerners. This is not strange in the case of Halaby’s speakers who are constantly aware of their status as outsiders in America. Being in an emotional relationship with someone who shares with a given speaker this racial reality may help the speaker feel secure and revive in her a sense of personal self-integration. But even these facts do not enable Halaby’s speaker to attain what she wants nor do they turn the couple’s relationship into love. As the poems will show, the love story of Halaby’s women is as futile as the stories of Abinader’s women with speakers whose voices are much louder. That is to say that Halaby’s speakers are more



expressive about their relationship, about their lovers, and about themselves than Abinader's. However, even with the loud speakers, the relationship between any couple is a form of emotional attachment to another who resembles the self of the speaker. It is a relationship that can hardly be called love.

The Arab American speaker of "a moonlit visit" (Halaby, 2012, pp. 52-55)<sup>190</sup> chooses a Pakistani man to be her lover and calls him "my other self". Ironically, this "other self" to whom she is attached has deserted her and is playful and delinquent, yet she wants him:

are you dead?  
or back in Pakistan  
or in LasVegas or Texas  
with an American wife  
or sleeping with men  
or sticking needles in your arm  
as you did once  
long ago  
or have you  
always been here  
with me  
My other self  
my lost Majnoon ("moonlit visit")

Arabs know "Majnnon" or "the mad one" as the renowned poet Quais bin al-Mulawwah,<sup>191</sup> who falls in love with Laila alAmeriah. Their historic love story is the archetype for sincere

---

<sup>190</sup> Hereafter "moonlit visit".

<sup>191</sup> Quais bin alMulawwah (688-?) is an Omayyad poet from the Najd area who fell in love with Laila alAmeriah but was turned down by her family who forced her to marry Ward bin alAgheeli. Adrift in depression, Quais

yet unrequited love. Quais becomes maddened or *majnoon* because Laila's father, according to tribal traditions, prohibits the lovers' marriage, a prohibition that sets them apart forever. What the speaker borrows from the story of Majnoon are two concepts: loss and madness. Her Pakistani lover, nicknamed B, has obviously deserted her but he remains her lost Majnoon. His madness is in his delinquent behavior roaming "in Pakistan" or in "Las Vegas or Texas," "sleeping with men/ or sticking needles in [his] arm" or settling with "an American wife". But ironically, if his delinquencies are enough to bestow on him the title "Majnoon", this Arab American speaker is deservedly the madder one in this relationship. She is attracted to a womanizer who sleeps with girls "tall blonde," "giggly Jewish," a homosexual who sleeps with "several Pakistani boyfriends," and a drug addict who adds the insult of his addiction to the injury of his multiple relationships.

However, and unlike in the original Majnoon story, this lover seems to intentionally estrange himself sexually from his beloved claiming to love her "eastern style," in spite of their "three years [...] of sleeping side by side". Her reply, in the light of his admission, sounds both cynical and pathetic:

eastern love in the West  
even the Midwest  
is tiresome, more so when it reeks of liquor  
cruelty and suicide threats ("moonlit visit")

Understandably, she is cynical because she knows that his seemingly chaste claim to love her "eastern style" is mere hypocrisy that smells of the deception of an addict. In behavior tantamount to sadism, the lover is merging his cultural conservatism with his adopted liberal values in an abusive way. That he has taken the speaker as a lover and has been sharing the

---

produced Arabic Literature's most profound and celebrated platonic love poetry all dedicated for Laila ("Quais bin alMulawwah," Ba'albki, 1992).

same bed with her for three years turns his sexual procrastination, which is bound to his cultural ethics, into an act that is both ironic and sadistic. She is obviously in need of his touch and of the pleasure of the intimate moment, but he denies her these. I would also interpret the lover's pseudo-conservatism as a possible misogynistic attitude. He, the man, knows the emotional need of this woman who has been loyally sharing this bed with him for three years in spite of her awareness of his deceitful nature. The patriarch in him, whether driven by his gender or by his culture, privileges him with hegemony. It is his decision that matters, and he alone decides when to cross cultural or gender roles and allow the Arab American beloved the satisfaction of her sexual needs.

Whether she is aware or not of the roles this lover is playing in loving her "eastern style", it is appalling that she continues in the relationship. However, she could have fallen victim to the lover's sadism and as a result she herself become a prey to self-inflicted masochism. The Arab American speaker is the masochist who is attached to a sadist who tortures her with his weapon of emotional deprivation while she consents and continues with him. Whether it is due to his sadism or to her masochism such a relationship is an awkward form of attachment rather than love. The speaker's confession at the end of the poem that she misses him "terribly/ went searching for [him] in cyberspace" reinforces my reading of her behaviors as masochistic. He is obviously absent and seems to have absented himself for such a long time from her real world that she looks for him in the virtual "cyberspace". Ironically however, she still calls him her "last Majnoon" in spite of the fact that he, in contrast to the loyal Majnoon of the original story, has toyed with her emotions and deserted her.

Compared to Abinader's rather peaceful women, Halaby's are extreme in their emotional choices. More often than not, Halaby's speakers are not only aware of their lovers' deceitful natures they also know about the details of this deceit, yet they just live with that and do not end the relationship. In another of these extreme emotional relationships

demonstrated in the poem “cheating” (Halaby, 2012, pp. 50-51)<sup>192</sup>, we have a passionate Arab American woman who is fully aware of the lover’s dishonesty “even as you loved me/ you chased countless women/ all wearing the scent/ of your beloved America” (“cheating”). Ironically, though not unexpectedly with Halaby’s speakers, this woman allows her lover to be close to her, “closer than any human has ever” done:

when you held me close  
closer than any human had ever held me before  
I could feel the jagged lies  
poking through your designer jackets  
I smelled the expensive stench  
of your self-destructive nights (“cheating”)

In a truly masochistic sense, this Arab American speaker who loves a delinquent Pakistani indulges herself in the pleasures of both passion and pain at the same time. Although the scene above could be described as a love scene, this love is so disturbed by the speaker’s polluted images of her lover’s debauchery that the whole scene turns into an oddity. She allows him to enjoy the pleasure of the moment while she, simultaneously and wildly, tortures herself with recalling graphic images of her lover’s erotic nights with “countless women”. In the light of this and of her realization that instead of love she only receives deceit, her apologetic lines “I was too young/ or too hopeful/ to let go/ so I held on tight” emphasize both her natural and pathetic, or rather morbid, need for that love. In her rationalization there is an understanding of her victimization; she is unable to take the decision of leaving. As a “young” woman she naturally hopes that things will change and that her lover will become more faithful. She demonstrates the reasons or excuses why many

---

<sup>192</sup> Hereafter “cheating”.

continue in abusive relationships that do nothing for them other than to prolong their emotional pain (Eckstein, 2010).

Although in attaching herself to this man this Arab American speaker is trying to resist loneliness, it could also be she has mis-interpreted her attraction to a Pakistani, or to someone who is as non-native and non-white as she is, as love. In America, this playboy lover is as hyphenated as she is, and his ethnicity could be more important to her in investing in a relationship than anything else. Therefore, her attachment to him could be more than an attraction to or an admiration of the other sex. For her, he is an embodiment of the East that they both belong to and that which she misses. She is distanced from that East by means of birth, something she could not control. He is now that East she is not ready to “let go” (“cheating”) not even if this East involves being emotionally deprived and violent with her. She is ready to endure the excruciating pain of emotional deprivation and deception instead of being left alone in America.

I have proposed the idea that for Halaby’s female speakers love is a form of compensation in the sense that if they fall in love, the speakers’ aim is to be with men of color. These men function less as lovers *per se* and more as surrogates for East from which both the speakers and their lovers originate. What the Arab American speakers seek in these men is the proximity of their land of origin but not real love. Additionally, these men are all as hyphenated in the American society as the speakers are themselves. What brings the four men of the poem “love thing” (Halaby, 2012, pp. 56-57)<sup>193</sup> below with the Pakistani lovers of the previous poems “moonlit visit”<sup>194</sup> and “cheating”<sup>195</sup> is one thing, their skin is as brown as the Arab American female speakers’. In the United States of America, these lovers and

---

<sup>193</sup> Hereafter “love thing”.

<sup>194</sup> (Halaby, 2012, pp. 52-55).

<sup>195</sup> (Halaby, 2012, pp. 50-51).

their beloved ones have hyphenated identities and this hyphenation is what unites them. In the dialogic poem “love thing” an Arab American speaker confuses her attraction or attachment to men of color (or minority men) with love. She is first attracted to her poetry teacher who speaks Arabic: “*I adore my poetry teacher/* I announced to my mother/ Upon my return to America” (“love thing”). She finds herself later attracted to Malcolm X and Spike Lee, both African American: “months later [...] I declared my admiration/ for Malcolm X and Spike Lee” (“love thing”). And her last “love thing” is an immigrant painter who makes “his living driving a taxi in New York City” and “who has dancing eyes and no country” (“love thing”). However, when the young Arab American speaker tells her mother that she adores her poetry teacher, her mother tells her that it is his Arabic language that she adores but not the teacher himself, “I’m sure it’s not love/ it’s your language thing” (“love thing”). And when she tells her that she admires Malcolm X and Spike Lee, the mother tells the daughter that it is sympathy rather than admiration, or as the mother puts it, it is her daughter’s minority feeling or “Black thing” (“love thing”). In such contexts, where men become homeland surrogate or a reflection of the hyphenated self, love becomes an uncertain feeling in which the speakers gamble with their emotional needs and desires.

Each for her own reasons, Abinader and Halaby fail to create Arab American women who are outspoken about their sexual needs and desires and for whom love is a joy of the senses and a warmth for the heart. Both create speakers who are insecure in their love and can never experience genuine love nor genuine sexual intimacy. For these to happen, Michael J. Hartwig (2009) emphasizes the need for reciprocal understanding, fidelity, and respect between any couple to take place, all of which are denied to the speakers of Abinader and Halaby. Clearly, in Abinader’s poetry communication and reciprocal understanding are absent as are the almost absent lovers. In Halaby’s poetry fidelity does not exist and instead we have an awkward compensatory relationship and a dispassionate attraction to the other

sex. In both cases, we have Arab American women who need to experience love but who fail to choose appropriately. The outcomes in both cases are women who are fragile and trapped in self-deception.

### **The Confident, Passionate Women of Mohja Kahf**

The shift in this part of the chapter from the discussion of the poetry of Abinader and Halaby to the discussion of the poetry of Kahf regarding women and passion is like a tectonic move that violently, though suddenly, breaks into a volcano or an earthquake. That is because it is a shift from the passive speakers of Abinader to the loudly confident ones of Kahf, and from the subordinate and naïve speakers of Halaby to the dominant women of Kahf. Caring for nothing but her self-esteem and satisfaction, the progressive, surprising, strong, and daring woman of Kahf is articulate in the expression of her passion, masterly in her heterosexual relationship, and in full control not only of her own choices, but also in control of her own body and that of her sexual partner. With Kahf, the voice of the woman is timelessly loud and outreaching. Kahf's poetry empowers the woman across time as her pan-Women poetic voice encompasses contemporary and ancient speakers both of which will be discussed separately here. Kahf's women seem to avenge the women of Abinader and Halaby and many other women who have been subdued for whatever reasons.

In creating women who speak frankly about their intimate relationship, their bodies and their sexual desires, Kahf and her speakers tread where none of the poets I have studied in this thesis dared to tread. That Kahf's speakers are women, and Arab women too, does not prevent them from expressing their innermost sexual desires without yielding or succumbing to the men they desire. And in this, Kahf's speakers distinguish themselves from the speakers of Abinader and Halaby who are powerless by comparison with the men to whom they are passionately attracted, or rather attached. Kahf's speakers are thorough and strong.

Broaching sensitive sexual topics, Kahf employs an inverse strategy in which she deliberately sensualizes, or rather eroticizes, the contemporary Arab-Muslim woman who is thought to be necessarily conservative first as Muslim and second as a woman. And at the same time, Kahf de-sensualizes the traditionally sensual Eastern icons: Scheherazad, Ishtar, and the Odalisques. In doing this, Kahf's speakers sound anything but conformist or traditionalist. They are true iconoclasts. Her contemporary Arab American veiled speaker is daring enough to be desirable of a "man's chest" ("Man's Chest") and a "man's kiss" ("Break a Fast") even in the middle of the holy month of Ramadan. Contrastingly, her sensual Eastern icons become modern activists capable of debunking the age-old sensual myth wreaked on them and has longed defined them as nothing but pleasure toys.

In fact, erotic images and "reference to the woman's body" is part and parcel of Kahf's writing (Vilarrubias, 2011, p. 67). In a love affair, Kahf's speakers are dauntless. Their sensuality, their sexual desires, and their bodies are not taboos neither are they embarrassing issues but are subject to discussion and presentation. As women who know themselves and their needs, sexual ones included, and who hold them in high regard, these speakers know how to satisfy themselves and are subdued neither physically nor linguistically. On the level of both action and language, Kahf's Arab American woman speaker is bold.

Kahf's choice of playful titles for her collection and for some of its poems emphasize her story of nonconformity and passion. This story begins with the collection's title *E-Mails from Scheherazad* (2003). Obviously, the invocation of the renowned Scheherazad<sup>196</sup> (the

---

<sup>196</sup> In *The Arabian Nights*, after the King Shahryar discovers that his wife has cheated on him, he swears to marry a virgin each night and to put her to death in the morning to make sure that she will not betray him. Scheherazad, who according to *The Arabian Nights* "had perused the books, annals and legends of preceding Kings, and the stories, examples and instances of by-gone men and things" (Burton 2001, p. 16), seeks to be



eponymous heroine of the book) whose story, according to the historian Paul Hazard, “all Europe was fain to hear” (cited in Irwin, p. vii) is multifaceted. While Scheherazad’s presence recalls the Oriental fantasy of the harem<sup>197</sup> and its secluded pleasure-giving odalisques who feature in the Kahf’s poems that will be discussed here, it also shatters this sensual fantasy by transforming this quintessential storyteller of the ancient and canonical<sup>198</sup> *The Arabian Nights* into an asexual busy woman, or a mundane citizen of the world who, like any other average citizen, does routine tasks like sending e-mails. In this anachronous staging of the renowned odalisque while she is sending e-mails, Scheherazad is asexualized and freed from the sensual gaze of the traditional reader. Here, her fame as a sacred teller of the sensual *The Arabian Nights* is frustrated by the emergence of a woman, a new Scheherazad, who is a user of a service that is used by millions around the world. If this nontraditional transformation of Scheherazad may disappoint the reader, it empowers this iconic character and frees her image from the bondage of traditional representations that confine her to a sensual Eastern harem, her fictitious perpetual abode. It fits the purpose of the discussion here to remember that *The Arabian Nights* remains the most influential book in Orientalising Eastern women on sexual bases (Vrolijk, 2007) attracting an audience “desiring bawdy entertainment and set the stereotype of women as lascivious adulteresses” (Al-Tae, 2008,

---

taken to the harem of Shahryar to “be a ransom for the virgins daughters of Moslems and the cause of their deliverance from [Shahryar’s] hands” (Burton, 2001, p. 17). After she is taken to Shahryar she wins him through her entertaining sensual stories, and at the end of one thousand and one nights, after Scheherazad becomes the mother of three boys, Shahryar, who is overwhelmed by her stories, marries her (Burton, 2001).

<sup>197</sup> Also known as Seraglio.

<sup>198</sup> The massive impact of *The Arabian Nights* can be inferred from the fact that following Antoine Galland’s French translation of 1704, *The Arabian Nights* were translated into several languages among these are Dutch, Danish, German, Greek, Hebrew, Italian, Russian, Spanish, Turkish, Urdu Yiddish and even Arabic and English (Makdisi and Nussbaum, 2008).

p.266). *The Arabian Nights* does so through popularising the harem literature of sensual odalisques and sultans (Vrolijk, 2007). Ironically and although much of the eroticism of *The Arabian Nights* originates in the “fertile imagination,” of its Oriental translator (Vrolijk, 2007, p. 381), writers such as Joseph Addison and Sir Richard Steel, Eliza Haywood, Samuel Johnson, William Wordsworth, Oscar Wilde, E.M. Forster and critics like Andre Gide and Henry Bordeaux still celebrate *The Arabian Nights* as authentic (Irwin, 2006; Vrolijk, 2007). The timeless exotic impact of *The Arabian Nights* and its heroine Scheherazad can also be seen nowadays (Roberts, 2005). The UNESCO, for example, designated the year 2004 for the celebration of the 300<sup>th</sup> Birthday of the translation of *The Arabian Nights* (Irwin, 2006). Additionally, the *Institut Du Monde Arabe* [*Institute of the Arab World*] in Paris held an exhibition entitled: à Les Mille et Une Nuits [The One Thousand and One Nights] (Dorothee, 2013, no page) to celebrate the *Nights*. The exhibition was held from November the 27<sup>th</sup> 2012 to April the 28<sup>th</sup> 2013. The exoticism of *The Arabian Nights* influences even the scientifically orientated magazine *National Geographic* which is not innocent of recycling an image of the Orient and women from the East as voluptuous, backward and necessarily oppressed (Steet, 1996). In the making of its movies about the Arab world or the East, Hollywood remains masterly in recalling the drama and the sensuality of *The Arabian Nights* (Shaheen, 2009). As will the analysis of the poems show, what Mohja Kahf does in her collection of poetry is to simply recall a literary heritage to shake it off. Basic to this shaking off is the empowerment of Scheherazad who stands for this heritage and for womankind.

Additionally, and as the discussion of the poems will soon reveal, the anachronism in the titles of the poems “Ishtar Awakens in Chicago” (Kahf, 2003, pp. 62-63)<sup>199</sup> and “*Thawrah*” serves to shake off unfair representations and to resurrect these old oriental icons

---

<sup>199</sup> Hereafter “Ishtar Awakens”.

(i.e. Ishtar and the odalisques) on less sexualized but progressive basis. In fact, one can say that Kahf's Scheherazad's is a symptom that shakes the tomb of the Mesopotamian Ishtar to awaken this icon in contemporary Chicago. It does the same to Matisse's odalisques who rebel against their lascivious representations in art and begin their revolution from the Retrospective museum in New York causing an upheaval in one of the most modern cities in the world.

The speakers of the poems "I Can Scent", "My Body Is Not Your Battleground" (Kahf, 2003, pp. 58-59), "Sacred Immorality" (Kahf, 2003, p. 60), and "Man's Chest" are contemporary Arab American women and thus not necessarily as sexual as Scheherazad, Ishtar, or the odalisques before them. However, Kahf sexualizes the content of what they say and from the very title of the poems. For example, in the olfactory image of the "scent" of the Arab man, and the visual and the tactile images of the "man's chest" there is a promise to the reader for an optimal joy of the senses even before the poem itself begins. Additionally, the title "My Body Is Not Your Battleground" (Kahf, 2003, pp. 58-59)<sup>200</sup> announces the autonomy of the body of the woman which also stimulates memory of the sensuality of that body and the age-old interest in it. The antithetical implication of the Kahf's title "Sacred Immorality" (Kahf, 2003, p. 60)<sup>201</sup> is meant to not only challenge conservative readers but to also sanctify sexual outspokenness in women, considered to be "immoral" and to eventually sexualize morality itself. And a title like "A Man's Chest" is graphic enough to evoke sexual connections and connotations in the memory of the reader. As the poetic discussion reveals later, the man's body is sexualized to the extent that it is to be peacefully trespassed by the woman.

---

<sup>200</sup> Hereafter "My Body".

<sup>201</sup> Hereafter "Sacred".

The transition below from the discussion of the titles of some poems by Kahf to the discussion of the content of Kahf's poetry will show that there is nothing more important than Kahf's speakers' desires and their passionate bodies. Even the geography and the history of their land of origin is made to facilitate these speakers' autonomy and sensuality. Furthermore, Kahf's speaker's love, in its most passionate and most erotic form, is politicized and negotiated with her body as a woman remaining the center of this negotiation. The eroticism of this Syrian-American poet reminds the reader of the renowned Syrian poet Nizar Kabbani who is Kahf's main source of inspiration. Writing about Kabbani's tendency to politicize his erotic love poetry, Kahf herself writes,

Love awakens the human beauty, beauty calls for freedom, and struggle widens from the personal realm of Eros to the public realm of politics, without the fragility of the sensuous and emotional reality of love that began it all. (Kahf, 2000, p. 50)

### **Mohja Kahf's Contemporary Sexualized Women**

My body is not your battleground

[...]

Has God, then, given you permission

to put your hand there? ("My Body")

Kahf's poem "My Body" is an almost topographical study of the speaker's sensual body where sexual discourse is politicized and then negotiated with the woman's body and voice dominating, rather than the man's. It is worth noting here, as Hamdar (2014) suggests, that it is not unusual for Arab writers to perceive the woman's body as symbolic of a land, or of a nation, or as "the state of the nation" (p. 35). Hamdar (2014) shows how the woman's body has gone from being constrained to being passive, and then to being exposed but fallen, and to being saved through suffering. Put in another way, this body has been, quite literally (and still is) a battleground for men writers. Unsurprisingly, the woman's body, particularly her sexualized body, is almost absent from the narratives of Arab women writers. Faithful to her

heritage which she employs extensively in her writings, Kahf invests in these ideas in her poetry but turns the table against stereotypical representation, or the absence of the presentation, of the body of the woman.

In “My Body” we have an Arab American speaker who is not only daring but playful. She employs exotic language and imagery to pull the lover towards her and then, when this lover is close enough, she lets go of him leaving him to his unsatisfied desires amidst a sensually charged atmosphere. She cunningly draws tempting images of her breasts, hair, private parts, thighs, and belly, among other parts of her body, and then devises prohibitions. Man, even her lover, cannot unconditionally trespass this body. Starting from the title, to the very body of the poem, this speaker, along with its creator, extends the metaphor of war, which is evoked by the word “battleground” in the title, and transmutes the speaker’s body parts into battalions:

My body is not your battleground  
My breasts are neither wells nor mountains,  
neither Badr or Uhud  
My breasts do not want to lead revolutions  
nor to become prisoners of war  
My breasts seek amnesty; release them  
so I can glory in their milktipped fullness,  
so I can offer them to my sweet love  
without your flags and banners on them (“My Body”)

It is obvious that the speaker perceives intercourse as a war against which she takes a defensive attitude and to which she refuses to succumb. To begin with, she tactically withdraws her body from the site of war and declares; “My body is not your battleground”. In a world that is changing its gender roles and is trying to assign more power to the woman

(Petersen and Hyde, 20011; Hartwig, 2009), this speaker changes the sexual norm and declares the independence of the body of the woman from patriarchal domination. For her, people's age-old and controversial concerns with her body and that of any woman in general, is tantamount to a war. "Badr" and "Uhud", are the first two recorded battles in the history of Islam and the starting points of the Prophet Mohammad's declarative mission as a prophet. To collective Muslim consciousness, it suffices only to mention either battle to inspire the atmosphere with a sense of awe. Kahf's speaker dares to compare her breasts to the awe-inspiring Badr and Uhud and in doing this, she achieves several things. First of all, she grows very self-important: *my breasts are historical; they are no less central to history than are Badr and Uhud!* Then, she disseminates sensuality in the air and as readers we eventually see, hear, and smell blood, pain, and death. Gradually, and after sensuality is evoked through the Badr-Uhud metaphor, this Arab American speaker who is learned in Islamic history practises visual striptease detailing her hidden body parts to provoke her powerless lover. Her seemingly peaceful presentation of her breasts: "My breasts do not want to lead revolutions/ nor to become prisoners of war" but seek peace and "amnesty" ("My Body") is in reality another provocative reference that is brimful with eroticism. Similarly, in her surrender of her "milk-tipped" breasts to the "sweet love" whom she chooses is both a demonstration of the power of her free will, and a portrayal of the woman when she is capable of evoking and mastering the sensual setting.

Pretending to protect her body, this intriguing Arab American speaker continues to provoke both her male partner and the reader by now liberating her hair and to then declare domination:

Untangle your hands from my hair  
so I can comb and delight in it,  
so I can honor and anoint it,

so I can spill it over the chest of my sweet love (“My Body”)

“Untangle” serves to warn and to reprimand. It is the speaker’s authoritative command not only to the addressee above but to the sensual man, be he the writer or the painter, to abide by the speaker’s roles. In doing this, she not only dominates the scene but also avenges her woman-self. Of course, while this speaker makes the imperative call, she carefully draws a voluptuous Venus-like image of herself “comb”-ing, “delight”-ing in, and “anoint”-ing her hair. What she does here as elsewhere is to express total hegemony over the self by the self. That is to say, she exposes her sensual body but forces the man to procrastinate and hence announces the end of man’s patriarchal hegemony against the woman’s body and self.

Her sexual innuendo reaches a climax when this Arab American speaker, claiming to “fortify” her body, succeeds in craftily, though metaphorically, exposing its most sensitive and private parts: her “private garden” and her “Golden City”:

My private garden is not your tillage

My thighs are not highways to your Golden City

My belly is not the store of your bushels of wheat

My womb is not the cradle of your soldiers (“My Body”)

Ironically, though deliberately, the metaphor which tries to euphemize her private parts results in making them more public than they should be. Her four “not”s above are more inviting than discouraging, thanks to the speaker’s explicit description of her “private garden” and her clear directions home to the “Golden City”. Her addressee who is denied the joy of the “garden” and from the pleasures of the “Golden City”, and whose “tillage” or his offspring is cut along with his children or future “soldiers”, is led astray at the gate of the “Golden City”. Through this series of exposing imagery the atmosphere is imbued with erotic descriptions and suggestions that are all woman-made. There is no denying that even sadism is suggested in “My Body”. This happens every time the speaker leads her partner through

her body to electrify his senses the way she, the woman, dictates, and then, when the speaker's partner is desperate to intensely feel the pleasure of the expected orgasm, sadistically, the speaker pulls her body away. I see this behavior by Kahf's speaker as a feminist reverse of the sadism of the lover in Halaby's "cheating" who, after sharing the same bed with the beloved for three years, denies her sexual pleasure, and claims to love her in a conservative way. The speaker here, as in most of the poems by Kahf, is simply reviewing gender-roles in sex and creating her own roles that empower the woman and disempower the man. Or it could be "to allow women to have the same luxury the men do in having complex personalities rather than the simple, flat ones of conventions" (Milliken, 2012, p. 259). In sex, the woman-speaker here does not merely exist to gratify the desire of her male-partner or viewer. Her desires come first, and her desire in "My Body" is to be the determined playgirl of the moment.

It fits the context of the discussion here to state that the speaker's "[m]y private garden is not your tillage" is tightly connected with Kahf's Islamic culture. It could imply a rejection of the meaning of a Quranic verse which metaphorically describes the sexual relationship between the woman and the man as a relationship between a farmer and a land where the dominant figure is the farmer who is, unequivocally, the man: "Your wives are/ As a tilth unto you/ So approach your tilth/ When or how ye will" (The Quran, 2: 223). Certainly, with the non-conformist speaker of Kahf, even the sacred Quranic scene is changed to suggest the domination of the woman and to reverse gender-roles even if this change is in total clash with the Holy Book of Muslims.

Before the poem concludes and shortly after the sensual battle ends, the speaker "celebrate"-s her "spring" with the "sweet love" of her choice. Her body is independent and so is the woman in her and now she sings the soft song of "lilac and clover:"

so that I may prepare the earth



for the new age of lilac and clover,  
so that I may celebrate this spring  
the pageant of beauty with my sweet love ("My Body")

The post-independence relaxed images of "earth," of "lilac and clover," and of "spring" contrast with the war-like imagery of the lines before. Her body is as generous as earth. Her children are the "lilac and clover" but not the future "soldiers" of the lines above. The sense of relaxation that prevails towards the end of the poem clears away the fumes of war and the tension of negation. It deconstructs the atmosphere of battles and bloodshed and replaces it for one as festive and replete with beauty as "the pageant of beauty" itself.

Conspiring together to draw sexually provocative images to arouse man, the poet and the speaker of "My Body" resort to the fantasy of *The Arabian Nights* and to the odalisques' motif to perfect the sexual impact of the moment. It is true that this poem fetishizes the body of the woman, but this fetishization is woman-made and it is for the sake of empowering the woman by making sexual choices affordable to her as well after they were affordable to men only. In "My Body", the woman remains the autonomous master who rules over the scene and who, at the end of that scene, chooses to spill her hair "over the chest" of the "sweet love" that she alone chooses.

It is significant to the discussion here to note that the speaker in the poem above and in the poems to follow does not only reverse gender roles in the sexual relationship and representations, but she also objectifies the body of the man and makes it become the possession of the woman. That is to say, the man's body becomes the woman's to control and explore. During the sexual affair, she does all the moving, she becomes the explorer and the adventurer while man is silent, submissive, and static. We have seen her in "My Body" where she frees her body and then denies man access to it unless she gives consent. She gradually gives, or rather dictates, directions and leads the way to her own body with the silent man

following these directions like a subordinate, like a thing. She allows man access to her body because she needs the pleasure his body offers. Put in another way, she uses man and arouses him through her provocative images because she seeks this arousal for her sexual gratification with man's body as her pleasure toy.

Kahf's speakers author another narrative of the autonomy and domination of women in "My Yemen" where geography and politics overlap to win women a victory. Yemen and Damascus, like Badr and Uhud of the poem before, are historically significant for Arabs old and new because they play important roles in the cultural and economic richness of Arabia. They do also enjoy a spiritual status in Muslims' collective memory because they are blessed by God and by the Prophet Mohammad. A chapter in The Quran (106) celebrates Yemen and Damascus, and the Prophet Mohammad blesses them in one of his sayings, "May Allah – God- bless our Yemen and our Damascus" (Al Askalani, no date, p. 6681). Kahf's speaker, who has an appetite for glory (have not Badr and Uhud been her breasts?) and is highly self-assured, borrows these blessed regions to metaphorically let them stand for her lover who becomes an embodiment of the rich culture she belongs to. "My Yemen" is a woman-centered, rhetorical treatment of the heterosexual intimate relationship. In this poem, this woman possesses the "city", the "streets", the "villages", and the "fields" of Yemen and Damascus as much as she possesses her partner for whom both places stand:

You are my Yemen and my Damascus

You are the goal of my winter journey and my summer

You are my city and its streets

You are my village and its fields ("My Yemen")

If he is the cities, his body parts are these cities' "streets", "villages", and "fields" and it is her moving across or through them that gratifies her sensually and spiritually. Noticeably, this analogy which is drawn between man and inanimate objects like cities and streets is

meant to emphasize man's objectification. Furthermore, the speaker's refrain "[y]ou are my" intrudes man's lifelong independence and controls him. In addition to his role as the speaker's pleasure object, man in "My Yemen" is the speaker's cultural-surrogate whom she, the woman, creates to be spiritually inspired. Whereas returning to her culturally rich lands of origin is unaffordable physically, it is spiritually and sensually affordable every time she moves across or through her man's body whether in "winter" or in "summer". This coming to him or to his body euphemizes the sexual intercourse that takes place when she decides that it should.

As has been suggested earlier, Kahf has a noticeable taste for the heritage of the Arab world or the East that she quotes and employs in her poetry to serve her literary purposes through her women speakers. In "My Yemen", Kahf's speaker excavates from the chambers of Arab history the ruins of the most passionate yet deprived lovers of all: "Layla and Majnun,"<sup>202</sup> and "Buthayna and Jamil"<sup>203</sup> to enable and empower them. These lovers are resurrected, reunited, and freed from the bondage of the tribal tradition that once separated them. The speaker of the poem invites the historic lovers to join her in an untraditional, joyous, and carefree feast in which she publicly celebrates the man she loves. To relax the historic lovers, she involves them in domestic work. She summons "Layla and Majnun" to "fry chopped potato" and "Buthayna and Jamil" to "cook eggplants in their rice" and be part of the speaker's moving and celebrative world ("My Yemen"). Her celebration of her lover is the historic lovers' celebration of a love they were denied throughout history. With "Layla

---

<sup>202</sup> The story of "Layla and Majnun" is the same story explained under the footnote on Quais bin alMulawwah above. Spelling varies because I stick to the way each poet spells the names.

<sup>203</sup> Jamil bin Mouamar (660-701?) aka. Jamilo Buthayna is an Omayyad poet who fell in love with his cousin Buthayna but was not allowed to marry her. Most of Jamil's poetry is dedicated for his beloved Buthayna ("Jamil Buthayna Jamil bin Mouamar.", Ba'albki, 1992).

and Majnun,” and “Buthayna and Jamil” around, Kahf’s liberal speaker is indeed authoring history in favor of women and of carefree passion.

The speaker’s excessive use of metaphors of cities and places (to refer to her lover and to his sensual body with her doing all the moving and the gazing) continues to the end of “You are my Yemen”:

You are my Cairo and my Baghdad

Your arms are Umayyad minarets

Your thighs are Tigris and Euphrates (“My Yemen”)

She covets her lover’s “arms” and “thighs” and compares them to ancient and sacred symbols like the “Umayyad minarets” and the “Tigris and Euphrates” (“My Yemen”). It is undeniably challenging for conservative societies, such as those of the speaker’s and the poet’s, to see the sacred and the erotic juxtaposed for the sake of creating an analogy between them. This challenge is exactly what Kahf’s speaker faces in this poem and elsewhere. There is no place for fear of society or for embarrassment in her poetry and for her, taboos do not exist. Her womanly voice is articulate and daring and should be heard.

“Man’s Chest” is like “My Yemen” in the sense that its speaker transforms the man’s body into an erotic object for the woman to enjoy and control. Again, the woman does this by using metaphors of places and cities that stand for her lover. The first line of the poem which is a rhetorical question “How come no one ever writes about” becomes the refrain of that poem to emphasize both the speaker’s adventurous nature and her sense of superiority. She is a pioneer and the first to indulge herself in the sensual pleasure a man’s body offers, starting from man’s chest down to his belly, thighs, and up again to his collarbone. Reminiscent of this poem and its introductory question “How come no one ever writes about man’s chest” are the following lines by Kahf’s compatriot Ghada Al-Samman, the Syrian novelist whose work still causes controversy because of its daring presentations of women’s sexuality and

passion. In these lines of her novel *Beirut 75*, she contemplates man's body and writes "O how magnificent is the man's body! Why don't women notice? [...] Why don't they truly look even once to the beauty of men's body and its innovative creation?" (cited in Stephan 2006, p. 172). There is also an underlying message in the statements of Kahf and Al-Samman that condemns the plethora of literature that transposed the woman's body into a male-dominated object of art while it, simultaneously, has blinded its eyes to another possibility where the man's sexual body should be the center of attention.

It is in "Man's Chest" that the man's sexual body is center of attention. In this poem, he is staged static and naked while the woman, who is the speaker of the poem, is busy gazing at that body and moving through and across it to mesh the sensual with the geographic and reproduce her woman-made erotic scenes. Man's chest becomes a place, or a haven "where a woman can hide/ and forget the city/ and be safe." His "belly" is a "smooth river" where "a woman can wade/ barefoot like a Gypsy". His "thighs" are "immense cliffs", discoveries which make the woman "shudder every muscle" until she reaches the "dizzying heights". Once again, Kahf's speaker euphemizes sexual intercourse but only to artistically make it more provocative. Her "barefoot [...] Gypsy" camouflages the voluptuous woman in her, she is "bare" or naked and disheveled like a "gypsy" because she is maddened with lust. With Kahf's speakers, it is the epoch of the woman's libido that takes hold of the poetic stage. Opposite to what is believed to be the norm when women write about sex, obviously, with Kahf, the representation of "the exchange of love" is not "terrifying" (Stephan, 2006, p. 162). Instead, it is screaming wildness.

At the end of the poem "Man's Chest", orgasm is euphemized but this happens to attribute an artistic position to this libidinous peak: "between his collarbone promontories,/ where, finally, the earth opens up its mist/ and there is a fine place". Time and again, Kahf

revisits the Quranic metaphor that draws an analogy between sexual discourse and the act of tilling a land; she reverses gender roles. Man's body becomes "earth" or the "fine place" whose cultivator is the woman. With the daring, non-conformist speaker of Kahf, it is obvious that the whole Quranic scene is changed to become woman-friendly even if this change conflicts with the Holy Book of Muslims.

Before I continue the discussion of Kahf's poetry, I find it appropriate to contemplate the poems I have analyzed so far regarding the woman's passion and sexuality. I do agree with Diprose's (2005) suggestion that when a woman writer writes openly about sex and about her sexuality, she "effectively wields a dagger" against male-dominated societies and increases her chances of "artistry" (p. 98). But I also believe that Kahf herself, in her poems that brim with eroticism and her almost voluptuous, though articulate and controlling, women-speakers, redefines the female character on a sexual basis. Malti-Douglas (1991) sees that in many cases like Kahf's "the word remains anchored to the body" (p. 10) and that many women writers still "do through the body" (p. 8). In my opinion, Kahf as a feminist has fallen into the trap she herself advocates against and she turned her women speakers, at least in the poems above, into lascivious characters.

Kahf's "Break a Fast" is an ultimate demonstration of the point I make above about Kahf's Arab American woman speaker who is self-confident and articulate yet also voluptuous. In this poem which employs a religious trope, fasting during the Muslims' month of Ramadan, the woman speaker is unable to restrain her sexual desire for her lover's kiss:

I have fasted, darling,  
daylong all Ramadan  
but your mouth —so sweet,  
so near —the hours long!  
Grant but one taste —one kiss!

You know what good reward

feeders of fasters gain

from our clement Lord

See how the fruits are ripe

and ready, O servant of God

Kiss me —it's time, it's time!

And let us earn reward ("Break a Fast")

Bearing in mind that it is the month of Ramadan during which Muslims refrain from sexual stimuli, the speaker's desperate tone and her urgency in "but your mouth —so sweet,/ so near —the hours long!/ Grant but one taste —one kiss!" are not only sensually provocative but could be considered as blasphemous too. This is true also about the last image in which she turns her sexual partner into a "servant of God" because he kisses her and feeds her sexual desire. In doing so, she merges the divine with the promiscuous. Additionally, and in order to break her fasting, this speaker chooses to indulge in activities that are considered obscene during Ramadan and arrogantly calls them sacred and religiously rewarding.

Furthermore, the speaker's voluptuous invitation to her lover "See how the fruits are ripe/ and ready, O servant of God/ Kiss me —it's time, it's time!" is reminiscent of Eve, the Fall, and Original Sin. The lines recall the forbidden fruit, the divine atmosphere, and the fall after the sin. Kahf and her speaker, intentionally or unintentionally, employ this motif of the woman's seducer who tempts her heterosexual partner to transgress a divine law. In the context of the poem, the seducer is the speaker who is a woman, the seduced is the man, the temptation is woman's "ripe" body, and the transgression is in the sexual indulgence during a sacred month. Of course, while these representations conform to Kahf's portrayal of the daring woman, this pattern with its repetitive obsession with sex gets morbid and underestimating of Kahf's women.

Back to Kahf's scheme of empowering women, her poem "The Woman Dear to Herself" (Kahf, 2003, pp. 55-56)<sup>204</sup> bluntly celebrates menstruation as a cycle of life that is exclusive to women. The poem begins with the epigram "*Azizatu Nafsiha*", a trans-literation of an Arabic term that means: "dear to herself". Kahf, in fact, plays with the epigram in its original Arabic form to empower the woman. She changes it from the original self-negating "*Azizatu Kaomeha*" which means "dear to her tribe/people" into the self-centered "*Azizatu Nafsiha*" which means dear to herself. Interestingly, as if playing with the original saying is not enough for her, she changes the whole definition of what "deariness" is to clash with the existing Arab-Muslim definition of deariness as the state of being aloof and discreet: "The woman dear to herself," writes Kahf, "when she has her period,/ says 'I have my period,'/ understanding that her powers are not a curse" ("Dear to Herself"). So, it is all about the woman's menstrual blood. Although there exists no Islamic verse which deems menstruation to be a "curse" as suggested by the poem here, the speaker could be conflating the harm caused by sexual intercourse during menstruation as stated in The Quran,<sup>205</sup> with the speaker's own understanding of that harm. Whatever the speaker's understanding of the Quran the indisputable point that this aloof speaker wants to make is that she is proud of every physical aspect about her body and that is why even "her period" is a blessing that she is going to overtly celebrate and talk about.

Worth noting here is that Kahf, in the poem "Dear to Herself", is directly influenced by Kabbani whom she quotes in her article "Politics and Erotics in Kabbani's Poetry" (2000) and comments on his celebration of "menstrual blood":

---

<sup>204</sup> Hereafter "Dear to Herself".

<sup>205</sup> "They ask thee/ Concerning women's courses./ Say: They are/ A hurt and a pollution./ So keep away from women/ In their courses, and do not/ Approach them until/ They are clean" (The Quran 1: 222).



Rather than be ashamed of her budding womanhood, she names her menstrual blood the ink to which she shall be quill: 'Here is ink without hand/ Here is blood without murder/ Shall I be embarrassed by it / Does the sea wave's mighty cresting embarrass?/ I am its source abundant/ I am its hand/ I am its spindle'. (cited in Kahf, 2003, p. 46)

So this is Kahf's modern Arab American woman when she is involved in her intimate matters. In love, she remains strong. And unlike the speakers of Abinader and Halaby before her, Kahf's never subdues herself to her lover. On the contrary, Kahf's woman speaker is the dominant partner in any sexual activity, she is the master and her addressee, who is her lover, is the passive receiver. Furthermore, this speaker is proud of her womanliness. Her sexual needs and her "period" are not embarrassing, neither are they taboos. They are distinctive parts of her and talking about them publicly is her right.

And although this speaker, along with its own creator, is guilty of re-objectifying the body of the woman and of representing the woman as a character who is obsessed with sex and nothing but sex, yet if this is understood in the bigger context of enabling women to write and speak about their own sexuality, something they have been deprived of by the male-dominant mentality, this accusation loses its appeal. As the discussion in the subsequent section continues, we will see that Kahf who has drawn her contemporary woman on sensual basis, does just the opposite to her women characters that are resurrected from the old heritage of the East. Kahf recalls her Eastern icons from memory to empower them on a more liberal and less sexual basis.

### **Mohja Kahf's Asexualized Oriental Women**

Scheherazad, Ishtar, and the Odalisques, who feature in Kahf's poetry and inspire the title of her collection, assume an iconic status in literature past and present. In Kahf's poetry, Scheherazad, the Odalisques, and Ishtar merge their past with their present and step into a

future that is free of the stereotypes that are imposed on them by Orientalists and anti-feminists. “*Thawrah*”, “If the Odalisques” (Kahf, 2003, p. 70)<sup>206</sup>, “from Scheherazad”, and “Ishtar”, draw on the allure of these Oriental icons as featured in the plethora of painting or in literature.

Odalisques feature prominently in western depictions of the secluded harem, especially at the height of such paintings' popularity in the colonial nineteenth and twentieth centuries and which few have had the chance to enter, (Lewis, 2004). Among these painters of odalisques is Henry Matisse, whose name appears in the title “*Thawrah des Odalisques* at the Matisse Retrospective” (EFS, 2003, p. 64) and who “created a ‘real’ stage, as can be seen in a celebrated photo of the era. A curtained platform becomes a niche, where the women [i.e. the odalisques], more doll-like than real, became impersonal mannequins within an exaggerated Middle Eastern décor” (Bock-Weiss, 2009). For many “European artists, such as Matisse, Ingres, and Delacroix” the odalisques stand for “Arab women” in general and this explains theirs and “Western-generated frenzy over” these figures of art (Darraj, 2002, p. 21) who conflate the odalisques with Arab women. The odalisques in Matisse’s paintings allow the observer to view them as sensual and lascivious bodies and hence effectively transforming them into objects of titillation and a form of sexual commodity. Kahf’s “*Thawrah*” revisits the odalisques of Matisse in order to empower them through freeing them from the bondage of stereotypical representations. Or, to use Cariello’s (2013) words, Kahf extensively draws on art to reconfigure it along the lines of a new “feminist, [and] post-odalisque subjectivity” (p. 102).

The speakers of “*Thawrah*” are in fact the famous odalisques painted by Henry Matisse and displayed, in the context of the poem, in one of New York’s art galleries, The

---

<sup>206</sup> Hereafter “Odalisques”.

Retrospective. In this narrative poem, the odalisques revolt against the artistic commoditization of their bodies. The story of the revolution begins when the main speaker, Small Odalisque in a Purple Robe, gives a signal to the rest of the odalisques in the paintings displayed in the gallery so that they all “kick through canvas,” (p. 64) liberating themselves from the painted imprisonment inflicted upon them in the colonial era. Once the odalisques have declared their revolt, they use their new-found freedom to its fullest extent. This can be seen in the odalisques’ autonomous use of language, in their freedom of action, and in their sense of sisterly solidarity. In this poem, as Cariello (2013) describes and the discussion below emphasizes, Kahf recreates art so that it eventually corrects the misconceptions it has circulated about women, particularly women from the East, who have long been made victims to the bias of that art (Cariello, 2013, p. 102). In letting the odalisques voice their long-subdued opinion and selves, Kahf artistically responds to Spivak (1988) in letting the “subaltern speak” as she sets the odalisques free from an “ideological construction” that “keeps the male dominant” (Spivak, 1988, p. 82).

The title “*Thawrah des Odalisques at the Matisse Retrospective*”, which merges Arabic, French, and English is itself revolutionary in the sense that it does not conform to linguistic or cultural autonomy. The title transliterates and code-switches the word *Thawrah* and the preposition *des* and uses straight English in its remaining parts. Such linguistic variation asserts knowledge of, yet freedom from, linguistic and cultural boundaries, thereby declaring openness to worldly possibilities. The word *Thawrah*, which is the Arabic word for revolution, establishes the poem's central theme: the poem is revolutionary in every regard, firstly in the formation of its title, and then in the presence of the word *Thawrah* itself, which introduces the revolutionary element and displays autonomy on the part of the odalisques under the orientalist gaze of Henry Matisse and consequently the gaze of the entire sensual world.

*Yaum min al-ayyam* we just decided: Enough is enough

A unique opportunity, the Retrospective brought us all together

I looked across the gallery at Red Culottes and gave the signal

She passed it on to Woman in Veil and we kicked

through canvas ("*Thawrah*")

The colloquial expression "*Yaum min al-ayyam*," which begins the poem - and the story of the odalisques' revolution, is the Arabic equivalent for 'Once upon a time' and is the Arabic way of inaugurating storytelling. In using this linguistic variation at the beginning of an English poem, the odalisques, hitherto the impression of a French imagination, mean to inaugurate the story of their collectively secured release from capture in Arabic, and imply a return to the decolonized Arabic self. This implication is later reinforced when the odalisques use the Arabic expression "*zulm wallah*" to express anger and pain ("*Thawrah*"), when they supplicate God in Arabic "*ya allah, ya fatah*" ("*Thawrah*"), and even when they threaten in Arabic using "*tara nahna akbar minkum/ 'w akbar min abukum!*" ("*Thawrah*"). Therefore, "*Yaum min al-ayyam*" and the rest of Arabic expressions that the odalisques use in their revolutionary endeavor are not merely linguistic display but are variations that assert the odalisques' free Arabic self.

The odalisques' use of their Arabic mother tongue is one step towards resisting the imperial power for which the French Matisse stands, and another towards establishing their original selves. In fact, the relationship between Matisse and the odalisques is not merely one between painter and object. This is because by the time Matisse produced his paintings, France was a colonial power in many countries in the Middle East,<sup>207</sup> from where the wronged harem odalisques originate. Under the authority of colonialism, the exposed body of

---

<sup>207</sup> Algeria was the last Arab Country to announce the end of French Colonialism and Algeria's Independence in 1962 (Algerian War, *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, no date)

an odalisque was not only an artistic object, but also a “historical context” and “the social and gender related construction of a man” (Brooks 1993 as cited in Cupic, 2003, p. 324). In the case of “*Thawrah*”, that man is Matisse and the history and society left to his construction (surely blurred by his gendered and colonial gaze), is the odalisque’s Eastern body. This he conquers through his paintings and constructs or demolishes in any way he pleases, because he is the master of two powers: the colonial and the masculine. In the poem, both Matisse’s masculine and imperial ‘construction’ are toppled by the odalisques, who, after commencing their story in Arabic, ferociously “kick/ through canvas” and begin using their native tongue as means of self-liberation and civil resistance.

However, it is noticeable that on more than one occasion in the poem, the odalisques code-switch to French, the language of Matisse:

*Mais* it wasn’t just one day we up and decided, *CulottesGris*.

I have to disagree. *Je voudrais dire*

*c’etais les deux Mauresques muhajabas*.

Hey, we don’t know they were Moroccan, With Magnolias.

*Oui, mais* it was like seeing *nous-memes*,

*Mauresque comme moi*, models of ourselves, walk in veils

then walk coolly out of the museum.

“She must be so uncomfortable in that position”

these two museumgoers murmured in front of Two Odalisques (“*Thawrah*”)

In fact, just as the Arabic “*Yaum min al-ayyam*” begins the story; the French words play a part in explaining it. The reader knows from the odalisque With Magnolias that the odalisques decide to kick through the paintings after two Moroccan women, “models of ourselves” murmur that the odalisques “must be so uncomfortable in that position”. This remark, made by “*les deux Mauresques muhajabas*” hurts the odalisques and spurs them on

to action, accelerated by the fact that they see themselves reflected in the two free Moroccan women who wear the hijab.

What With Magnolias says is significant. First because her use of French as a form of linguistic code-switching reveals the multilingual skills that she and the other odalisques possess expressed by the extent to which they are conversant in the language of he who painted them. Of course, in being thus conversant and hence knowledgeable in more than one language, the odalisques destroy yet another misconception about them - that which defines them as mere objects of pleasure. Additionally, in using French, the language of Matisse, whose paintings wronged them, the odalisques transcend and demonstrate an example of civilized tolerance of the Other, something Matisse has not been capable of. The odalisques' usage of French is also an implication that they do not hate the language itself; only its colonial associations.

The fact that With Magnolias contrasts the elegance of the hijab with the humiliation of nudity reveals an underlying yearning that the odalisques might one day look as elegant in a hijab as these Moroccan women do. The remark that the two Moroccan women "walk in veil/ then walk coolly out of the museum" offers an early counterargument to attacks made on the hijab on the basis that it is a barbarous custom and "a symbol of the silencing of women" (Darraj, 2002, p. 23). Gradually through the poem, we will see how the reference to the coolness of hijab, made here by the odalisques, becomes a real act when at the end of the poem, some odalisques "put on *hijab*" ("*Thawrah*"). For the odalisques, who have experienced the awfulness of nudity, the hijab is an elegant thing. Nudity, they imply, is the oppressor.

These odalisques also demonstrate their superiority in knowledge and in tolerance when they passionately refer to that Western art and those Western artists who have wronged them. Despite the unfair artistic treatment that they have received, the odalisques have taste

for art and love it. They love “Expressionism”, “Impressionism”, and the “cut-outs” and are fine to buy a “Klimt” or a “Matisse”:

We’re not anti-art, we love Expressionists,

And the Impressionists, and Cubists even.

Why,

just last week, I bought a Klimt.

Even Matisse, we love his cut-outs,

pure colour, pure shape set free in modern space

We just don’t want to be made something we’re not

It’s a lie. The paintings lie about us. We were made to live a lie (“*Thawrah*”)

“We’re not anti-art,” say the odalisques, defending themselves while expressing a knowledge-based love of that same art from which they kicked their way free. They make clear the reason for their revolution: to stop the lies told about them by art, lies which dehumanize them, constantly promoting the same repugnant images of them as ignorant, sensual, and exotic beings, “something [they’re] not”. This treatment of the odalisques’ motif, says Darraj (2002), is still prevalent and sometimes even conflated with the image of the contemporary Eastern women. So, in dismissing this thought about themselves, the odalisques dismiss it against the Eastern women past and present.

After they break the artistic bondage, the odalisques’ sense of freedom continues to grow stronger to the point where they bluntly charge their repartee with sexual innuendos, and brag about being able to use “dirty words in several languages” (“*Thawrah*”). “[T]hat bastard”, says Pink Nude,<sup>208</sup> “my ass is cold from these blue tiles/ and I can’t love a man who made my head smaller than my tits [...] fuck your sense of color” (“*Thawrah*”). They even

---

<sup>208</sup> The model for this painting is Lydia Delektorskaya who was Matisse’s mistress (Pokhrel, 2015).

curse in Arabic, their mother tongue, “*tara nahna akbar minhum/ w akbar min abuhum!*” to warn the guards that the odalisques are greater than the guards’ mothers and fathers. In using “dirty language” against the painter and the whole world which has objectified them, the odalisques are definitely expressing anger. In addition to expressing anger, these odalisques, in their new dawn, are manifesting a liberal self that is not bound by anything, not even social diktats. That is to say, use of inappropriate language clashes with a “commonly held perception [that] it is only men who bandy about derogatory and taboo words” and that women should be excluded from this vulgar practice (Klerk *et al.*, 1992, p. 277). Consequently, we can say that the odalisques’ command of the male-dominated vulgar language announces the end of man’s authority over derogatory terms and his “sexploitation” (Kurth, 1974, p. 483) of taboos. Cursing in Arabic has the additional meaning of resistance through the use of the mother tongue. Such a form of resistance was emphasized by nationalists during the colonial period (Thiong’o, 2004) and the odalisques are practising just that.

The revolution of the odalisques here against their commodification and against the undermining and fake representations they were subjected to, take another turn when odalisque Zulma tears down the museum’s banners to cover up and to cover the naked bodies of her sister odalisques: “Zulma reached up for us, being the tallest/ And tore down museum banners/ for ones who wanted clothes” (“*Thawrah*”). Zulma’s is an expression of collective anger against the nude poses the odalisques have adopted to delight the gaze of their onlookers. Through Zulma’s forceful action of tearing down the banner, the gallery has lost its meaning too. This happens when Zulma, in order to cover the odalisques’ naked bodies, tears down the same banners that are used to advertise Matisse’s gallery of the nude odalisques. In doing this, Zulma frustrates museumgoers and liberates her sisters from awful and discomfiting gazes.



Additionally, in Zulma's and other odalisques' "covering up" is an implication that putting on the veil can be the active choice of a free woman. This opposes the stereotypical perception of the Muslim veil as an uncivilized social construct that connote Muslims' inferiority (Lewis and Macmaster, 1998) and a religious sign that resists change, and as a "signifier, just as it was in the colonial period, of an entire social, political and cultural order (barbarism, oppression, 'medieval' values, fanaticism)" (Lewis and Macmaster, 1998, p. 31). In fact, here, as elsewhere in the poem, covering up is given a meaning tantamount to freedom:

The National Organization for Women got annoyed

After **some** of us put on the hijab,

And wouldn't let us speak at their rally,

But wanted us up on their dais as tokens of diversity ("*Thawrah*", my emphasis)

Some of the odalisques have been contemplating the choice to "put on the hijab" from the moment they make a reference to the cool hijab of the two Moroccan women in the previous scene, "*Mauresque comme moi*, models of ourselves, walk in veils/ then walk coolly out of the museum". Ironically, ignoring the fact that only "some" odalisques independently "put on the hijab" and some remained hijab-free, the feminist "National Organization for Women" becomes selectively anti-feminist when it excludes the veiled odalisques from participating in the feminist "rally," thereby denying them one of their civil rights. Eventually, the "National Organization for Women" here becomes a taker but not a giver of women's rights. This organization exhibits a manipulative attitude when, despite its rejection of the hijab of the odalisques, still wants the odalisques to be part of its "dais as tokens of diversity".

It should be noted here that such prejudice against the hijab is not uncommon. Liz Fekete (2006), in her essay "Enlightened Fundamentalism? Immigration, Feminism and the Right" questions the attitude of some feminist claims which display anger against the hijab and see it only as a practice forced on women. Fekete (2006) states that in some European

countries, including France, Denmark and Sweden, even if “Muslim girls appear to choose this practice autonomously, this does not mean that they are autonomous” (“*Thawrah*”). Accordingly, in freely choosing the hijab, these odalisques mean to liberate hijab from the age-old misconception about this Islamic practice as an oppressor of women, and to redefine it as compatible with freedom.

As well as removing a misconception about the hijab, through insisting on wearing it in disregard of the objection of “The National Organization of Women”, the odalisques give the hijab a meaning that is tantamount to civil resistance. Their defensive actions, along with Zulma’s previous ones, coincide with Lewis’ (2004) observation that, “veiling and seclusion were regularly utilized by a diverse Middle Eastern population as a form of resistance to foreign colonial interventions,” (“*Thawrah*”) a historical detail that is often forgotten in Western discourse about the veil. Kahf’s poem serves as a reminder of this.

In order to achieve utmost liberation and modernization of themselves, the odalisques now involve themselves in progressive works: “The Lane Robe immediately got involved/ in the Algerian civil war [...] The Persian Model went on *Hajj* [...] Small Odalisque in a Purple Robe,/ decided to study law, all of it” (“*Thawrah*”). By engaging in nationalistic, religious and civil activities, Lane Robe in “the Algerian civil war”, The Persian Model in “*Hajj*”, and Small Odalisque in a Purple Robe studying “law, all of it”, these odalisques set themselves free and exit, practically speaking, from the “oda” in “odalisque”.<sup>209</sup> The odalisques’ actions here rebuff an anti-feminist, colonially oriented stereotype of the “dogmatic model of the Orient ”defined by Simona Cupic (2003) as “a woman of the East spend[ing] her life in rest or leisure as she waits to realize her bodily function of sexually pleasing her men” (“*Thawrah*”). It is their body that the odalisques free and then cover to

---

<sup>209</sup> “*oda* means room, thus the woman in the room, or the concubine of the sultan confined to an enclosed space” Darraj (2002, p. 21).

escape from the position of being the sexual toys of an unfair world. Additionally, the civil activities they are involved in is to smash that stereotypical perception of them, or of Eastern women, as lazy, domestic pleasure givers.

In my opinion, “*Thawrah*” is another coming-of-age poetic story of the women for whom the odalisques stand. The poem traces these women from the moment they “kick” out of the “canvass”, or the womb that has enclosed and sheltered them for ages, to when they are born naked and immature, to the moment they gain self-confidence, secure their bodies, and act independently; till they enjoy full liberty of the self and the body. The concluding scene is particularly significant as evidence of my reading of the poem as coming-of-age or as a rebirth story of the woman. A great feeling of solidarity brings the free odalisques together when in the last scene With Magnolias is in labor before she gives birth to a girl:

She screamed She pushed She crowned She gushed. And then!

It was like nothing any of us had ever seen. Pure life,  
pure energy.

It was a girl! She waved her fists. She let go.

with a high-pitched protest to the world (“*Thawrah*”).

Being the first signal the newborn gives to the world, the baby girl’s fist-waving with a “high-pitched protest” asserts the confident and uncompromising character of the woman in the dawn of her liberty. That “It was a girl”, not a boy, is significant in many ways. First, it is a celebration of the woman’s sex and a celebration of motherhood as female-exclusive gifts. According to De Clercq (2013), qualities of women like childbearing and birth should not be “marginalized but revaluated and even considered superior to those that characterize men” (p. 17). In giving birth to a girl, With Magnolias becomes a superior being. The celebration of the birth of this girl also symbolically rebuffs the hegemonic narratives or attitude that still favors boys over girls (Kalfoglou and Scott and Hudson, 2008). When it comes to the East

from which the odalisques spring, the roots for a deplorable anti-female stance can be traced to the pre-Islamic era when some Arabs practised selective infanticide and buried their baby girls alive the moment they were born. This abhorrent crime is condemned in The Quran. As is stated in the Muslims' holy book, on the Last Day, God will ask the female infant who was buried alive to name her killer so that He would condemn him to perpetual torture (The Quran 81: 8). When Kahf gives With Magnolias a baby girl, and Kahf's odalisques celebrate the girl's birth with a sense of joy and solidarity, both the poet and her subjects make a universal apology to the thousands of baby girls who were subject to sex-selective killings. They also offer another apology to those girls and women who are still discriminated against. The "[p]ure life,/ pure energy" the baby is born with signifies the features of the coming epoch of the female freedom and empowerment. It is an innocent, yet lively and enthusiastic epoch.

I, Small Odalisque, drew up my purple robe and ululated  
 and we all ululated  
 in post-odalisquesque  
 jube-jube-jube-jube-jubilation ("*Thawrah*")

Obviously, the last four lines of the poem are highly sonorous. The repetition of the word "ululation" with its trilling quality, and the staccatos in the last line, perfect the poem's festive atmosphere that accompanies the birth of With Magnolias' daughter and the rebirth of the odalisques. Small Odalisques indirectly refers to the nature of their previous historic subjection when she calls their new epoch the "post-odalisquesque"'s epoch indicating a transition from their pre-non-human status, i.e. that of being odalisques or sexual fetishes, into the human status. In the "post-odalisquesque"'s epoch they emerge as full human beings who speak languages, know art, swear, work, protest, marry, and give birth.

Kahf revisits the odalisques' theme once again in her poem "Odalisques" which is a dramatic monologue by an angry and threatful odalisque. Contrary to the positive and cheerful tone of the odalisques of "*Thawrah*", the speaker of "Odalisques" compresses into her short contemplative narrative an age-old anger that is not abated by the process of time. If the odalisques of "*Thawrah*" could come to terms with society and could forgive art's and history's biased treatment, an odalisque still bears her grudge and dramatizes her feeling in "Odalisques":

If all the odalisques  
in all the paintings  
in all museums  
in all the capitals of Europe,  
got up and left,  
they'd leave a big hole in the wall  
and people who'd come to stare through it  
would get sucked into Asia and Africa  
until the whole peninsula of Europe  
would disappear between those two great  
thighs of the world ("Odalisques")

This dramatic monologue contemplates the deplorable reality of the Orientalist biased vision of the East's allegedly secluded women or the odalisques. The speaker's conditional "if's" tell about this odalisque's disinterest in the revolution of the Matisse's odalisques above. She knows very well that there are still tens of her sister imprisoned and objectified "in [...] paintings/ in all museums/ in all the capitals of Europe". *Who would save them?* as if the odalisque murmurs to herself. To answer this implied question, the odalisque employs a

sexual metaphor and turns the table against that art which has always fetishized her and her sisters.

In this sexual metaphor the world becomes the lower part of the odalisque's body, with Asia and Africa as her "thighs." Asia and Africa are particularly chosen because the odalisques were imported from these two continents (Lewis, 2004). Obviously, focus is put on the lower body and the thighs of the odalisques to highlight the lustful nature of the odalisques' paintings and representations. If the odalisque moves, meditates the speaker, her movement would open a hole at which museumgoers and "the whole peninsula of Europe", would be gazing driven by their lustful desires. As if the odalisque is waiting for this moment to take place, and before she totally disappears, she is going to "suck" gazers all together through that hole until they "disappear", or until she annihilates them and takes her revenge. Were the odalisques to walk away, all Orientalist representations, artifacts, European artistic collections, and galleries would be severely depleted.

It should be stated here that despite the aggressive tone of "Odalisques" the poem is a platform for this speaker from which she has the opportunity to vent out and practise her freedom of expression after being the silent thing of art for ages. That she still holds a grudge regardless of the changes around her accentuates the depth and the timeless nature of the injury, or the trauma, which the odalisques suffered from as a result of colonial art. Additionally, this contrast between the violent thought of the odalisque in "Odalisque" and the cheerful thinking of the odalisques of "*Thawrah*" means to humanize these women even more. That is to say, like all human beings, these women who were odalisques do indeed have personal choices that distinguishes them from each other. They are not mere identical artistic figures that are made to serve one end: satisfying the lustful gaze of the world.

As has been stated earlier, Kahf's interest in the representation of women includes Scheherazad and Ishtar beside the odalisques. Scheherazad is particularly important here as

she prominently features in the title of the whole collection and is the speaker of some of its poetry. Both Scheherazad and Ishtar will be the focus of the discussion below and through empowering them, Kahf completes her scheme of empowering women in general.

Scheherazad, the protagonist of the lascivious harem in *The Arabian Nights*, turns storytelling into a voluptuous act. Commenting on Scheherazad's talent as a storyteller, the Saudi critic Abdullah Al-Ghathami (1996), in his book *المرأة و اللغة* [*The Woman and the Language*], indicates that Scheherazad, who understands the mentality of man, turns the act of storytelling into a seductive procedure reminiscent of sexual intercourse (Al-Ghathami, 1996). In doing so, the critic continues, she conforms to the male-oriented societal construct which maintains that a woman is created to provide sexual entertainment for men (Al-Ghathami, 1996). Under the seductive cover of night, Al-Ghathami (1996) states, Scheherazad takes her reader to the bed of Shahrayar and allows that reader to experience the thrill of a night in the harem. Although it is undeniable that Scheherazad's power is in her "skillful narration" (Makdisi and Nussbaum, 2008, p. 266), the fact that she executes storytelling "through seduction and temptation" (Makdisi and Nussbaum, 2008, p. 266) is likewise unarguable.

In the poem "Scheherazad", Scheherazad casts off the yoke that represents her as the plaything of men and frees herself from the libidinous ties of *The Arabian Nights* which have restricted the power of her word to her sexual appeal and to Shahrayar's sexual desire and which have confined her to the seclusion of a harem. In the poem, Scheherazad is portrayed as a modern novelist, not a storyteller, in her "seventh novel and book tour" ("Scheherazad"). Furthermore, Scheherazad publishes from New Jersey, not from a secluded harem; and most importantly, she is single and independent, following her "split up" ("Scheherazad") from the seminal Shahrayar. In a nutshell, new Scheherazad's deviates drastically from the old storyteller of the sensual *The Arabian Nights*. She is, as will be shown, strong and assertive.

This pro-feminist deviation of the plot is evident from the very title of the collection *E-Mails from Scheherazad* (2003) which means to take Scheherazad from the legendary, inclusive, and sexual realm of *The Arabian Nights* to re-establish her as a free, practical, and modern woman who uses technology like millions of others.

The poems' de-sexualization and neutralization of the character of Scheherazad begins with the carefree attitude and language it lets Scheherazad use:

Hi, babe. It's Scheherazad. I'm back

For the millennium and living in Hackensack,

New Jersey [...] ("Scheherazad")

The informal "Hi, babe" which opens "E-mail from Scheherazad" reminds us of the colloquial "*Yawm min al-ayyam*," at the start of "*Thawrah*". In the seminal *The Arabian Nights*, any tale by Scheherazad usually begins with expressions that emphasize the patriarchal authority of man over woman and the slave over the master, as with "O auspicious King," or "O Commander of the Faithful," or "O King of the Age" (Burton, p. 201). By using the short, carefree, and colloquial "Hi, babe", the new Scheherazad distances herself from the *Nights*' norm and gradually frees herself from the authority of its classical and authoritative language. Using this linguistic deviation is also key to Scheherazad's liberation from the domination of the harem and its associated male-centered tropes.

It fits the purpose of this discussion to explain why Mohja Kahf chooses to resurrect and then to free Scheherazad in New Jersey, after doing the same for the odalisques in New York, and then to Ishtar in Chicago. This deliberate choice cannot only be based on the commonly held view that America is the land of freedom. In fact, for Kahf to repeatedly resurrect these iconic Eastern characters outside the East, is to envision a new millennium world which welcomes the hybridization and acceptance of cultures. In a way, the odalisques in New York, Scheherazad in New Jersey, and Ishtar in Chicago, reject Samuel Huntington's



(1993) “Clash of Civilization” theory, which invariably antagonizes the relationships between the West and other cultures in the post-colonial and post-cold war eras. Through “E-mail from Scheherazad” and other similar poems in the collection, Kahf tries to “emphasize hybridity and diaspora” as an essential means of existence (Abdelrazek, 2007, p. 12).

Another remarkable deviation in the plot of the original Scheherazad’s story is in the news about Scheherazad’s divorce from Shahrayar in “Scheherazad”, an incident that clashes with what the reader knows about the couple’s marriage after one thousand nights of partnership in *The Arabian Nights*:

[...] A thousand days

Later, we got divorced [...]

[...]

Shahrayar and I share custody of our little girl.

We split up amicably (“Scheherazad”).

As is known, in the *Nights*, the thrilling and sensual relationship between Scheherazad and Shahrayar, epitomized in the narration, is vital to the tales. In this new version however, this vitality which once enslaved Scheherazad in the harem, is destroyed, as the couple “split up”. Scheherazad is now free from all bondage, even the one of marriage. The famous couple’s parting is also significant because it separates Scheherazad’s gift as a creative woman from her need to maintain a presence in the sensual atmosphere of Shahrayar’s harem. In maintaining her talent after she divorces Shahrayar and exits the harem, this daughter of Eve proves that her creativity is innate and is bound by neither time nor space.

That Scheherazad and Shahrayar “share custody” of their “little daughter” is another significant woman-friendly deviation in the plot of the original tale that is made in order to empower Scheherazad and women in general and to also redefine the historic couple’s story on a more liberal basis. In their modern manifestation, Scheherazad and Shahrayar parent a

girl but not three boys as in the original story of *The Arabian Nights*. The couple's new world is woman-centered. One can draw a parallel here between this new twist in the original plot, and the last scene of "*Thawrah*" when With Magnolias and the rest of odalisques celebrate the birth of a baby girl and assert the presence of the woman. Absenting the couple's three boys from the scene to present their girl highlights a definition of the new age as an age where the presence of the female is vital and assertive. It is also an indication that favoring boys, and hence men, over girls is losing its appeal.

However, Scheherazad in her modern manifestation still believes that she is masterly in the use of language and in the creation of stories. After she reminds us that her tales in the *Nights* were not mere practice of sensuality but were to "save [...] virgins" and "still the beast of doubt" in Shahrayar ("Scheherazad"), she tells us that in the new millennium: "I teach creative writing at Montclair State,/ And I am on my seventh novel and book tour" ("Scheherazad"). So Scheherazad is timelessly proud of herself and an ardent believer in her gift of story-making. If she was a story-teller ages ago, today she continues as a novelist elevating the power of her word from the oral to the written and investing in it without denying her older self and talents. Scheherazad enters the world of writing, which for decades was denied to women (Al-Ghathami, 1994) and she is stronger than before. That she teaches others "creative writing" and is on a "book tour" is to further emphasize this novelist's empowering and progressive nature.

The realm of *The Arabian Nights* is incomplete if we ignore its third most vital character who is a female, Dunyazad. Commenting on the importance of this character, Enderwitz (2004) writes:

Dunyazad serves as Shahrazad's companion during the (roughly) three years of the *Nights*, but her real importance lies in her instigation of the storytelling. She is the

ones who raises the king's interest and keeps it alive by urging Shahrazad to tell a story, by commenting upon it, and by interrupting it at the end of the night (p. 198). Duniyazad, who functions both as an oracle and as a critic of Scheherazad's story and who was enclosed with her in the sensual atmosphere of the *Nights* is also recalled in "E-Mail from Scheherazad" to be redefined on pro-women bases:

[...] Duniyazad. She

Was the one who nightly used to start it.

She and my ex do workshops now in schools

On art & conflict resolution. Narrative role! ("Scheherazad")

It is Duniyazad's new destiny which is intertwined with Shahrayar that is most striking. That Duniyazad has a new professional career is not surprising, but what is surprising is that her colleague in the field is Shahrayar, the Sultan of the *Nights* once and the now ex-husband of her sister Scheherazad. In other words, what this poem is trying to do is to humanize the character of Shahryar and make him an ordinary man. This positive portrayal of a different Shahrayar tries to erase Orientalists' colonially-oriented images of a brutal and uncivilised East populated with "violent and cruel sultans, who abduct women and keep them as hostages in their seraglio, while demanding to court them" (Makdisi, 2008, p. 268). Shahrayar of the poem "Scheherazad" is not the tyrant Sultan who puts virgins to death every morning. Today, he is a gentle divorcee who "shares custody" of a daughter with Scheherazad and who has a professional career. The trio relationship of Scheherazad, Shahrayar, and Duniyazad is made pragmatic and reciprocal to end the melodrama and the mystification often attached to this trio whenever their names are mentioned. The other positive portrayal, which is of Shahryar and Duniyazad getting along well together and doing "workshops now in schools/ on art and conflict resolution", serves to evoke a progressive and erotic-free world where the trio exist and interact.

Reminiscent of *The Arabian Nights* but reconstructed as in Kahf's "Scheherazad", the world, the characters, and the themes of this poem are rewritten from a perspective that respects and befriends the female characters. As it empowers the woman, the poem "Scheherazad" also humanizes the rest of the *Nights*' main characters including the king Shahrayar. In this sense, one can say that this poem represents an act of rebalancing which has broad scope and appeal.

There is an element in the character of Ishtar<sup>210</sup> that makes her different, and in some cases, superior to Scheherazad and the odalisques. If Scheherazad and the odalisques are famous characters of art, Ishtar is an ancient Mesopotamian goddess. If Scheherazad and the odalisques stand for the woman's character when it is sexualized, Ishtar is an embodiment of antithetical meanings. She is the goddess of sexualized love and war, of care and vengeance, and of earth and the underworld. Ishtar's character is complex and defining it on a lucid basis is a difficult task. In fact, Pryke (2017) emphasizes that because of the many "stimulating complexities of Ishtar's character", it is difficult to draw a "comprehensive picture of the world's first goddess of love" (p. 5). I should note here that their difference privileges Scheherazad, the odalisques, and Ishtar as women and in consequence it privileges women in general. It reflects the sophisticated nature of women who may share interests and can be united but at the same time maintain their individuality and their independent choices. I agree with De Clercq (2013) who asserts that encouraging this individuality among women empowers them and puts "emphasis on pride in one's identity" (p. 18).

However, while Ishtar's complex character privileges this goddess, it overwhelms her at the same time. She is privileged in the sense that the many powers she has and the many

---

<sup>210</sup> "Inanna, known as Ishtar in Akkadian, is [...] the goddess of war and fertility [...] she possesses the ability to control storms. Her name may mean 'Lady of Heaven.' [...] [She is] also known as Ashtoreth in the Bible" (Sherman, 2008, p. 235).

meanings she stands for make her broad, multifaceted, and thus superior. At the same time, the fact that her character combines opposing facets may let Ishtar live a sense of instability caused by the contradictory feeling that art made her subject to, and this in turn may cause her image to be seen as inconsistent Pryke (2017). In fact, “Ishtar Awakens” employs this premise about the complex character of the oldest female goddess to further stress the aim of Kahf’s poetry of liberating and empowering the women. “Ishtar Awakens” resurrects this Eastern deity, after centuries of amnesia, in Chicago to let her rebel against, and use, the complex Mesopotamian representation of her character.

Ishtar wakes up in Chicago as furious as a bloody fighter. She might be threatening, but her pride as a woman is immense:

My arrogance knows no bounds  
and I will make no peace today  
and you should be so lucky  
to find a woman like me (“Ishtar Awakens”).

Ishtar’s declared “arrogance” and her feeling of superiority could be demonstration of a womanly power in front of an addressee who “should be so lucky/ to find a woman like” her. Contextually considered, it is highly possible that the implied addressee is a man. Further in the poem, however, Ishtar refers once again to her woman’s self in an assertive and threatening tone. She refuses to be an “insta-woman/ soluble in [...] drinking water” (“Ishtar Awakens”) or “bend one womanly knee” (“Ishtar Awakens”). It is because of these feminist references Ishtar makes to her character first as independent but not “insta-“or “soluble”, and second as strong and inflexible, I am inclined to interpret the “you” of the poem as indicative of a man of a patriarchal mentality that tries to bend or marginalize Ishtar. Pryke (2017) quotes both feminist writers de Beauvoir (1949) and Frymerkensky (1992)- as ones who believe that in Ishtar’s anger or tone of complaint when this goddess is portrayed, there is an

expression of pain at her “self-awareness of her own marginal nature” (p. 196) in the patriarchal Mesopotamian civilization.

In the light of these interpretations of Ishtar’s anger, one can eventually understand her war-like attitude in “Ishtar Awakens” as not only an assertion of her nature as the womanly symbol of war. Rather, it is a revelation of a speaker who is unable to tolerate being subdued either by a patriarchal mentality or by an anger that is made, through mythology, an intrinsic part of Ishtar’s character. Ishtar could also be furious at the unfair portrayal her character has been subjected to. She is made to stand for opposite qualities, yet she is mostly remembered for her sexuality where her various other qualities as “a flexible and accomplished negotiator”, and as a goddess who enjoys “physical and verbal skills” (Pryke, 2017, p. 197) are almost forgotten. In waking up in modern Chicago, the goddess seizes the chance of her new coming to rebel against the oppressive tropes that were imposed on her character by a lustful androgenic mentality.

While my interpretation of Ishtar’s angry return is more general, Abdelrazek’s (2007) comments on the same poem “Ishtar Awakens” is more specific. We both consider Ishtar’s portrayal and reaction in “Ishtar Awakens” as antimisogynistic, but we differ in the sense that I read this anger as a reaction to any androgenic oppressive mentality, the Mesopotamian included. Abdelrazek’s, however, specifies “two oppressive systems” which she believes the goddess is rebelling against in “Ishtar Awakens in Chicago”:

Arab patriarchy, which wants to silence her and restrict her freedom using false religious excuses and American misconception and negative stereotypes of Arab women. Both of these systems commit different crimes by silencing Arab women in “different” ways; either not allowing them to speak or just ignoring them and excluding their voices from mainstream discourse (Abdelrazek, 2007, p. 102).

In my view, which is reinforced by the poem which makes no overt or covert reference to either of the systems Abdelrazek specifies above, the resurrection of an Eastern Mesopotamian goddess in the Western modern Chicago is meant to emphasize Ishtar as a universal symbol of women everywhere. She is not a symbol of the Arab woman confronting patriarchy or stereotypes. Rather, this goddess stands for any oppressed or abused woman wherever this woman exists. Ishtar's is a more inclusive endeavor for liberation.

It is worth noting here that opposite to Scheherazad and the odalisques who liberate themselves from all bondages and become progressive in themselves, Ishtar in "Ishtar Awakens" reemploys her stereotypical representations against her addressee without trashing any of them. Ishtar is entangled by the historiographical fact that she is a mythological goddess who is rooted in the ancient history and writings of ancient Mesopotamia. She is enslaved by these ancient facts and freeing herself from them would not be as easy as with Scheherazad and the odalisques who are the making of a relatively newer art and literature. It could be Ishtar's awareness of her entanglement that strengthens her anger against her exploitation. Her imagery becomes more violent as she blames "the world," "East" and "West", for her misery:

Today neither will the East claim me  
Nor the West admit me  
Today my belly is a well  
Wherein serpents are coiled  
Ready to poison the world,  
And you should be so lucky ("Ishtar Awakens")

That she feels that she is manipulated as I have claimed earlier, is reinforced here. Ishtar exempts no one, neither the "East" nor the "West" from exploiting women for whom she stands. As Ishtar is primarily remembered for her sexuality, it could also be that her

aggressive statement in the stanza above is also directed against the sexual exploitation of women in general. Her witch-like and sadistic imagery serve as a metaphor for Ishtar's unmitigated and global anger: "my belly is a well/ Wherein serpent are coiled/ Ready to poison the world". Each "serpent" in her "belly", which is otherwise part of Ishtar's sexualized body, is now symbolic of a deeply contemplated need to avenge one's self. To frustrate any traditional interpretation of Ishtar's existence on a sexual basis, this goddess amnesties one sexual part of her body by making it untouchable, and if touched, she warns, it would bite and "poison". In describing part of her body in this way, Ishtar tries to exclude any possible connotations of sexuality anyone may make when this goddess's name is pronounced, or her image is portrayed.

If Scheherazad and the odalisques desexualize their portrayal in a more peaceful and more integrative way, Ishtar's march towards deliverance is tented by sadomasochistic behaviors. She wakes up in Chicago declaring that her "arrogance knows no bounds" and that she makes "no peace", and despite this, she warns her addressee that he should feel "happy" and "lucky". And later in the poem, Ishtar's anger seems to annihilate her, and her imagery becomes masochistic when she warns that she will inflict pain upon herself to cause more fear and to express deeper anger:

I will make no peace  
even though my hands are empty  
No, I will cut off my breast  
and slit the throat of my child  
and lap up poison with my tongue  
before I make peace with you today ("Ishtar Awakens")

Her threats to take a revenge against this global "you" includes self-destruction: "I will cut off my breast" and "lap up poison with my tongue". Like her "belly" in the stanza before,



Ishtar's "breast" and her "tongue" are part of her sexualized body. In being ready to mutilate them, she is showing readiness to endure fleshly mortification but not to be subjugated again to the will of the world that has sexualized and imprisoned her in a mythology that is patriarchal and misogynist. While it is true that her imagery is sadomasochistic, yet in being ready to endure fleshly pain in order not to be subjugated tells us about a woman who is strong and uncompromising, even superior.

Even though I tried to relate Ishtar's anger and her threatening tone and imagery to her rejection of being redefined within the framework of the same symbolic meanings that were bestowed on her by Mesopotamian mythology, in the last stanza of the poem Ishtar herself makes strong statements about her wishes to feel free to "talk big" and to "be all or nothing" before she "bend[s]" herself to anything or anyone:

I will talk as big as I please

I will be all or nothing

And I will jump before the heavy trucks

And I will saw off my legs at the thigh

Before I bend one womanly knee ("Ishtar Awakens")

Ishtar's inclusive reference to a "womanly knee" which is unbendable is undeniably a feminist declaration of independence. Her anger and her issue are about her as a woman in confrontation with the world "East" and "West". Although it is resolved at the end of the poem, this declaration helps explain the sadomasochism of Ishtar. Though a goddess, she has been "clouded in historiographical biases" (Pryke, 2017, p. 187). In being "clouded in [...] biases" she is denied rights and discriminated against. This closure comes as a strong statement about discrimination against women at all levels. If the accomplished goddess of love and war is angered because she is subjugated, then it is highly likely that women who are less empowered and those who are underprivileged would be subject to gender

discrimination and bias. She could simply be speaking on their behalf, feeling angry on their behalf, and threatening the biased world on their behalf. Knowing that even in a modern city like Chicago she might be subjugated as a woman, Ishtar returns strong and threatful even if this return may cost her her life. In “Ishtar Awakens”, this goddess of love and war who sacrifices her body, part by part, on the altar of her emancipation, attains the status of a woman martyr.

### **Conclusion**

The goal of this chapter has been to explore women’s voices when they approach the woman, her love, her body, her sexuality, and other liberal choices a woman may make. In this chapter, the research departed from the troubles of war and diaspora and reached out to more intimate issues. I investigated patterns of love and examined the presence of the body of the woman in, and its absence from, the context of love and sensuality. I then shifted the lens of my analysis and looked at the realm of legends to examine other women speakers and study their choices when they set themselves free from stereotypes and become independent.

Variation in love patterns revealed variation in the woman’s capability of debating her own sexual or emotional desires. On the one hand, love subdues Abinader’s speakers. On the other, constant failure in love confuses the emotions of the speakers of Halaby and turns them into self-made preys that seem to enjoy self-torturing. Both Abinader’s and Halaby’s speakers’ deplorable failure in love results in the absence of any mention of the woman’s sensual body and her bodily desires. I call Abinader’s and Halaby’s women fragile because they are constantly troubled and weak. As has been stated early in this chapter, Naomi Nye, in the books adopted for the sake of this thesis, avoids any talk about women’s love, their bodies, or their autonomy.

Drastically contrasting with the women portrayed before them are Kahf’s women, past and present, who lead their ways, wherever their destination is, steadfast and strong.

Their women-selves are larger than any context, larger than history itself. In love, they dominate; their bodies, they liberate; their choices, though inconsistent, are great and empowering. It is no wonder then that among all women studied in this thesis, only Kahf's women are capable of the erotic and are expressive about it. However, it is not all about Eros, it is about women's free choices, or as former odalisque Pink Nude puts it "our sexuality,/ When we choose to put it into play,/ is our business" (*Thawrah*). In fact, with Pink Nude and other women characters from the realm of legends, this chapter explored other women's portrayals and choices. As if the current world is not enough for Kahf, she also reaches out to the old world to liberate and empower its women. From that world she chooses Scheherazad, the Odalisques, and Ishtar and resurrects them to end the havoc wrought on them by the world, and to freely redefine their identities in the way they choose. With them, and with other women, Kahf has authored women's lives in a progressive way.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Conclusion**

The literary analysis this thesis applied on the content of the poetry of Elmaz Abinader, Mohja Kahf, Naomi Nye, and Laila Halaby revealed that Arab American poetry, including that which is written by contemporary women poets, functions as a platform of expression that provides a tangible context for the exploration of Arab American lives and experiences. In this sense, this finding of the thesis provided a direct respond to the call of critics in the field of Arab American literature (Handal, 2001; Ludescher, 2006; Charara, 2008) to give Arab American poetry the place it deserves in scholarly studies so that poetry receives part of the attention Arab American fiction receives by critics and scholars. This thesis showed that through their poetry, women poets are main contributors to eliminating ignorance and correcting misconceptions about Arabs and Arab Americans. As the thesis demonstrated, through their predominant themes of diaspora, war, and women's intimacy, Abinader, Kahf, Nye, and Halaby could fight persisting stereotypes about Arabs, Arab Americans, and the women alike, and hence could establish themselves as intellectuals whose weapon is their word in its poetry form. The varied voices that the four women poets deployed in their poetry do not only articulate the pleasures and the pains of Arabs and Arab Americans but also emphasize the wide spectrum of the experience of Arab American, an experience that is believed to be otherwise monolithic and lacking (Handal, 2004; Ludescher, 2006; Charara, 2008; El Maleh, 2009; Nelson, 2015). These varied voices could also prove the capacity of the women poets to diversify their literary input and to demonstrate agency engaging in independent and realistic portrayal and criticism of the self and the world. Additionally, the deep and complex treatment of topics like racism, nostalgia, assimilation, trauma, passion, women's sexuality and autonomy received in relation to the main three themes emphasize Arab American poetry, particularly that poetry which is written by women poets, as mature

and rich enough as to deserve more multifaceted investigation that ends its status as an invisible genre in Arab American literature (Hattem, 1998; Handal, 2001; Charara, 2008).

Examining the topic of diasporic literature, the study could show how each one of the poets created speakers who react in diverse ways to their diasporic status, to patterns of racism, and to their life in their “dwelling place”<sup>211</sup> (i.e. the United States). Kahf’s and Nye’s Arab American speakers, for example, offered examples of cheerful adaptation to the “dwelling place”<sup>212</sup> as well as maintaining the best possible attachment to, and interest in, the land of origin. But when they tried to overcome or to adjust themselves to their diasporic status or avoid racial bullying, however, the speakers of both Abinader and Halaby seemed passive, as in the case of Abinader, and aggressive, as in the case of Halaby. While all speakers found their ways of surviving in their “dwelling place”<sup>213</sup>, they remained attached to their homeland even if they did not speak its language: Arabic. As Charara (2008) and others suggest (Handal, 2001; Ludescher, 2006; Salaita, 2006; Al Maleh, 2009), Arab American poets cannot completely detach themselves from the Arab world to which they frequently return in their texts. In this thesis, manifestation of homeland was found in homeland symbols and cultural practices, such as places or culinary habits that were retrieved to bind the speakers to the land of origin. The discussion of diaspora in this thesis has also shown that Abinader, Kahf, Nye, and Halaby outgrew, like the writers of their generation, the mere nostalgic treatment of their subject matters. They also successfully resisted resorting to victimization. It is true that racism in the United States against Arab Americans provided a backdrop for many poems by these women poets, yet, through these poems, racism against

---

<sup>211</sup> Proctor (2003).

<sup>212</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>213</sup> *ibid.*

this minority group was substantiated as indicative of the status quo of the Arab American in the United States.

War was another topic frequently revisited by these Arab American poets. The continuing political unrest in the Arab world reached Arab Americans in their “dwelling place”<sup>214</sup>, shaped their identity, and politicized their writings (Nash, 2007; Charara, 2008; Nelson, 2015). It was the trauma of war and conflict whether in the poets’ land of origin or in the United States that was central to the discussion of war poetry in the collections studied in this thesis. The chapter on war provided an understanding of war trauma and its impact on both men and women speakers from different age-groups as they were affected by, and interacted with, different war scenes. The chapter investigated the post-traumatic stress experienced by the speakers and examined the transformational objects those speakers employed in order to overcome their worries and pains. For reasons explained in the course of the chapter, the 9-11 attacks and the subsequent American invasion of Iraq remained central to the poets’ consciousness and to their speakers in Chapter Three. Reactions in the United States following the 9-11 attacks, mostly seen as biased reactions by the speakers, traumatized those speakers and provided the inspiration for the poetry which was studied here. As the discussion in this chapter showed, on many occasions, as in the Arab-Israeli conflict, or the 9-11 attacks, or in the United States’ invasion of Iraq, the tragedies befalling Arabs and Arab Americans were contextualized to draw the attention to the involvement of the United States in the world’s affairs (Harb, 2012, p. 22), particularly this country’s biased involvement against Arabs and its unfair political meddling in Arabs’ issues. Understood in this context, when present, the retaliatory reaction of the speakers was meant to tame the

---

<sup>214</sup> *ibid.*

frenzied reaction and the considerable bias in the United States against Arab Americans and Easterners alike particularly in the wake of the 9/11 attacks.

More intimate discussion of women, love, the female body, women's sexuality, and the other liberal choices women made were central to the fourth chapter of this thesis. In this chapter, the research departed from the troubles of diaspora and war and reached out to more private issues. This chapter investigated patterns of love and examined the presence of the body of the woman in, and its absence from, the context of love and sensuality. This chapter has also shown that variations in love patterns reveal variation in the woman's capability of debating her own sexual or emotional desires. The more fragile or unstable love experience a speaker went through, the less this speaker was inclined to talk about her body or her sexuality. The stronger the speaker was, the more forceful she was about her body and her sexuality. Women from the realm of legend were invoked by the poet Mohja Kahf and examined in this chapter. Kahf stretched time and place to empower Scheherazad, the Odaliques, and Ishtar, and in empowering them, she eradicated the horrendous stereotypes cast upon them by orientalist or the West.

In their poetry, Elmaz Abinader, Mohja Kahf, Naomi Nye, and Laila Halaby contribute to authoring a chapter in Arab American poetry along with other women and men poets from the same minority group in the United States. They also help to substantiate the dawning realization in the United States that within the last few decades, there have long been other groups of minority writers who compose texts that are inspired by varied experiences be them cultural or historical (Nelson, 2015).

Even though I have tried to produce a comprehensive analysis of the poetry of these four women poets, the field still lacks proper exploration and there is still a need for more scholarly and critical studies on Arab American literature, particularly poetry. Majaj (2006) urges researchers in the field to include other Arab American writers, including poets, who

reflect the diversity of this group. Majaj (2006) particularly mentions Jewish and homosexual Arab Americans who, according to her, are under-investigated or “excluded” by the “existing” research (p. 133). Further studies that identify the poems scrutinized here as dramatic monologues or dialogues through which Abinader, Kahf, Nye, and Halaby partake in narrating a nation would lead to an understanding of these women’s contribution to poetry as a literary genre.

The four writers studied here are poets, but each one of them has, at least, a published novel. In addition to that, Abinader is a playwright and performer, Kahf is a critic and Nye is recognized as a writer of juvenile literature. That being said, these writers’ other works in line with their poetry could be examined in order to produce a more comprehensive overview of their literary input. In fact, each one of them can be the subject matter of an independent scholarly work that is interested in Arab American literature.

In this thesis I did not attempt to thematically compare or contrast the writings of contemporary Arab American poets with the literary input of the founders of Arab American literature. Neither did I attempt to find a link between Arab American literature and the literature of other minority groups in the United States with regard to similar contexts and topics as the ones studied here. Hence, I believe that a comparative study in the field would provide a wider context for better understanding of the literature, the pleasures, and the pains of minorities in the United States. The literature included here led the way of discussion in this thesis to be informed by the three themes I have found predominant when I explored the poetry of Abinader, Kahf, Nye, and Halaby. It might hence be a valuable addition to the field if a study that concerns itself with rhetorical aspects of their poetry is conducted.

I end my thesis with the following excerpt from Steven Salaita’s most recent book *Modern Arab American Fiction: A Reader's Guide* (2011) in which he once again returns to the Arab American literary tradition in the United States and urges the need for the prosperity



of a “critical apparatus” (p. 5) that is based on the various aspects that define the lifestyle of Arab Americans. Salaita explains with a sense of optimism that:

[t]here is no large volume of work in the Arab American critical tradition, but practitioners of Arab American literary criticism are now being hired in universities and drawing interest from scholarly presses. A small but devoted group of young scholars is currently producing study after study highlighting numerous dimensions of Arab life in the United States. (p. 5)

In writing a thesis on Arab American literature, I hope I was successful in contributing to the development of the critical apparatus Salaita mentions above, an apparatus that increases interest in the exploration of Arab American literature with particular attention given to its poetry. I also wish that I am among those researchers who introduced to the American literary tradition, voices, that are, according to Nelson (2015), “working out of the artistic imperatives arising from a wide range of cultures and historical experiences” (p. xvii).

## Bibliography

### Primary Resources

**All textual notes are taken from the following references:**

Abinader, E. (1999), *In the Country of My Dreams*. Sufiwarrior: California.

Abinader, E. (2014), *This House, My Bones*. Willow Books: Detroit.

Halaby, L. (2012), *My Name on His Tongue*. Syracuse: New York.

Kahf, M. (2003), *E-mails from Scheherazad*. UFP: Florida.

Kahf, M. (2013), "A Man's Chest" in *Patheos*: Hosting the Conversation on Faith. Online.

Available at: <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/loveinshallah/2013/09/09/a-mans-chest/>.

(Accessed 03/23/ 2017).

Kahf, M. in Akash, M. and Mattawa, K. (1999), "More Than One Way to Break a Fast." *Post*

*Gi-bran: Anthology of New Arab American Writing*. Syracuse: Syracuse UP. p. 263.

Nye, Naomi S. (2002), *19 Varieties of Gazelles*. Greenwillow: New York.

Nye, Naomi S. (2005), *You and Yours*. BOA Editions: New York.

Nye, Naomi S. (2011), *Transfer*. BOA Editions: New York.

### Secondary Resources

Abdelrazek, A.T. (2007), *Contemporary Arab American Women Writers: Hyphenated*

*Identities and Borders Crossings*, New York: Cambria Press.

Abdulrahim, S. (2013), *Between Empire and Diaspora: Identity Poetics in Contemporary*

*Arab-American Women's Poetry*. PhD thesis. University of Stirling. Available at:

<https://dspace.stir.ac.uk/bitstream/1893/19525/1/Safa%27a%20Thesis.pdf> (Accessed:

02/25/2019).

Abinader, E. (1997), *Children of the Roojme: A Family's Journey from Lebanon*. The

University of Wisconsin Press: Madison.

- Abinader, E. (1999), *In the Country of My Dreams*. Sufiwarrior: California.
- Abinader, E. (2001), "Profile of an Arab Daughter". *Al Jadid*, Vol. 7, No. 37 (Fall 2001).  
Available at: <http://www.aljadid.com/content/profile-arab-daughter>, (Accessed 05/10/2018).
- Abinader, E. (2014), *This House, My Bones*. Willow Books: Detroit.
- A Date in Exile, موعِد في المهجر إلماز أبي نادر. (2007) Al Jazeera Channel, 20 September.
- Aisch, G., Pearce, A., and Rousseau, B. (2017), "How far is Europe swinging to the right?" *The New York Times*. Online.  
<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/05/22/world/europe/europe-right-wing-austria-hungary.html> (Accessed 10/16/2017).
- Ajrouch, K.J. and Jamal, A. (2007), "Assimilation to a white identity: the case of Arab Americans," *International migration review*, Vol. 41, No. 4, pp. 860-879.
- Akash, M. and Mattawa, K. (1999), *Post Gibran: Anthology of New Arab American Writing*. Syracuse: Syracuse UP.
- Al Askalani, bin H. (no date), فتح الباري بشرح صحيح البخاري [Fath AlBari], Volume VIII. Al Marifa: Beirut. [Google Book].
- Al-Athari, L. (2008), "This Rhythm Does Not Please Me": *Women Protest War in the Dunya Mikhail's Poetry*. MA thesis. Kansas State University. Available at: <http://krex.k-state.edu/dspace/handle/2097/865> (Accessed 05/15/ 2016).
- Al Barjal, Ahmad S. (2016), الصالونات الأدبية في الوطن العربي [Literary Salons in the Arab World]. Al-Mashareq: Cairo.
- AlDebayyan, Debayyan M. (no date), الحيض و النفاس [Menstruation and Postpartum]. Volume I. No Publication Data. [Google Book].
- "Algerian War" (no date), *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*. Available  
<https://www.britannica.com/event/Algerian-War>

- Al-Ghathami, A. (1994), *المرأة واللغة* [The Woman and the Language]. Beirut: Arab Culture Center.
- Al-Jahez, Uthman O. (no date), *Kitāb al-Hayawān*. كتاب الحيوان. Vol. 3. pp. 409-464. Al-Halaby: Cairo, Egypt.
- Alkhalili, M.R. (2007), *Alhaneen wal ghourba fil Shear Alandalusi*. الحنين والغربة في الشعر الأندلسي. Unpublished dissertation. AlNajah University: Nablus.
- Alkhashroom, A. (1982), *Al Ghourba fil Shear AlJahili*. الغربة في الشعر الجاهلي. Arab Writers Union: Damascus.
- AlKhouri, Fuad I. (1997), *إيديولوجيا الجسد: رموزية الطهارة و النجاسة* [The Body Ideology: The Symbolism of Chastity and Shame]. London: Dar AlSaqi.
- Allen, J.G. (2005), *Coping with Trauma: Hope through Understanding*. American Psychiatric Publishing, Inc: Washington.
- Al Maleh, L. (2009), *Arab Voices in the Diaspora: Critical Perspectives on Anglophone Literature*. Rodopi: Amsterdam and New York.
- Almond, I. (2007), *The New Orientalists: Postmodern Representations of Islam from Foucault to Baudrillard*. I.B. Tauris: London.
- Almujam Alwaseet (2004), *المعجم الوسيط*. Complex of Arabic Language: Cairo.
- Al Qassemi, S. (2016), “The Arab World’s other migration problem”, *The Middle East Institute*. Online. <http://www.mei.edu/content/article/arab-world%E2%80%99s-other-migration-problem>. (Accessed 10/17/2017).
- Al-Samman, H. (2015), *Anxiety of Erasure: Trauma, Authorship, and the Diaspora in Arab Women’s Writing*. Syracus: New York.
- al-Sayyab, B.S. (1960), in *أنشودة المطر* [Rain Song] (2012), Hendawi Press: Cairo.

- Al-Tae, N. (2008), "Under the Spell of Magic: The Oriental Tale in Rimsky-Korsakov's Sheherazade." *The Arabian Nights in Historical Context: Between East and West*. Ed. Sari Makdisi, and Felicity Nussbaum. Oxford: Oxford U.P. 2008. pp. 265-295.
- Altoma, S. (1997), "NAZIK AL-MALA'IKA'S POETRY AND ITS CRITICAL RECEPTION IN THE WEST". *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 19(4), pp. 7-20. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy4.lib.le.ac.uk/stable/41858218>
- "American at the turn of the Century." *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 55, No. 3, pp. 459-473.
- Amin, N. (2017), *Migrating the Feminine*. Cairo: Afaq Bookshop and Publishing House.
- Amnesty International (2016-2017) *Amnesty International Online*.  
<https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/africa/mauritania/report-mauritania/> (Accessed 10/26/2017).
- Anderson, B. (2016), *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, London. Available from: ProQuest Ebook Central. (Accessed 02/02/2019).
- APA Online. (2014), <http://www.apa.org/topics/trauma/>
- Arab American Institute <http://www.aaiusa.org/demographics> (Accessed 05/05/ 2018).
- Ashour, R, Ghazoul, F.J., & Reda-Mekdashy, H. (eds) (2007), *Arab Women Writers: A Critical Reference Guide, 1873-1999*, American University in Cairo Press, Cairo.
- Ba'albaki, M. (1992), *معجم أعلام الموردين* [A Dictionary of Biographies]. Beirut: Darul Ilm lil Malaeen.
- Barnier, A., Callard, F., Caygill, H., Carruthers, M., Coombes, A., Feuchtwang, S., Freeman, M., & Goodman, S. (2010), *Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates*, Fordham University Press, US. Available from: ProQuest Ebook Central. (Accessed 11/11/2017).

Basag, A. (1994), *Lisan ad-Din ibn al-Khatib. عصره بيئته حياته وآثاره*. Vol.

87. Darul Kutub: Beirut. [Google Book].

Beckert S. et al. (2010), *The World in World Wars: Experiences, Perception and Perspectives from Africa and Asia. Studies in Global Social History*. Brill: Leiden

Ben-Rafael, E. (2013), “Diaspora,” *Current Sociology Review* 61(5-6) pp. 842 –861

sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav DOI: 10.1177/0011392113480371

csi.sagepub.com

Black Lives Matter, (2013), *Black Lives Matter Global Network*. Online.

<https://blacklivesmatter.com/about/what-we-believe/> (Accessed 12/26/2017).

Bock-Weiss, C. (2009), *Henri Matisse: Modernist Against the Grain*. Pennsylvania:

Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009. [Google Book].

Bonn, S., & Bonn, S.A. (2010), *Mass Deception: Moral Panic and the U. S. War on Iraq*,

Rutgers University Press, Piscataway. Available from: ProQuest Ebook Central.

[03/03/2018].

Boullata, I.J. (1990), *Grape Leaves: A Century of Arab American Poetry*, ed. by Gregory

Orfalea and Sharif Elmusa (Book Review), *Middle East Journal*, vol. 44, no. 1, p. 155.

Boullata, I.J. (2007), *Badr Shaki al-Sayyab: Hiatouh wa Shiarouh* بدر شاكر السياب: حياته وشعره

Arabic Institute for Research and Publication: Beirut.

Bracegirdle, C. (2011), “Writing Poetry: Recovery and Growth Following Trauma”, *Journal*

*of Poetry Therapy: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Practice, Theory, Research, and*

*Education*. 24: 2, pp. 79-91. (Accessed 06/17/2016) The University of Leicester Digital

Library.

Bronte, C. (1847), *Jane Eyre*, Wordsworth Classics: Kent (1992).

Brower, C. H. (2004), “The lives of animals, the lives of prisoners, and the revelations of Abu

Ghraib”. *Vanderbilt Journal of Transnational Law*, 37(5), p. 1353+. Retrieved from

<http://link.galegroup.com.ezproxy4.lib.le.ac.uk/apps/doc/A128168056/EAIM?u=leicester&sid=EAIM&xid=ec84d713>

Burton, R. (2004), *The Arabian Nights*. Translated from Arabic *كتاب ألف ليلة و ليلة* by R.

Burton, 1884. The Modern Library: New York.

Campo, J.E. (2009), *Encyclopedia of Islam*. Facts on File: New York.

Cariello, Marta (2013), "Walking Out of the Museum: The Reconfiguration of Modernism in Mohja Kahf's "Thawrah des Odalisques at the Matisse Retrospective". *Textus*, Vol. 26 Issue 2, p99-113.

Carroll, J. (2014), "The Bush crusade: sacred violence, again unleashed in 2001, could prove as destructive as in 1096". *The Nation*, September 20, 2004, 14. Expanded Academic ASAP (Accessed 06/19/2018).

<http://link.galegroup.com.ezproxy3.lib.le.ac.uk/apps/doc/A122331565/EAIM?u=leicester&sid=EAIM&xid=c26c2a4d>.

Castleden, R. (2011), *Conflicts that Changed the World*, Canary Press Online Limited.

Chandler, R.M. and Wang, L. and Fuller, L. (2010), *Women, War, and Violence: Personal Perspectives and Global Activism*. Palgrave: New York.

Charara, H. (2008), *Inclined to Speak: An Anthology of Contemporary Arab American Poetry*. The University of Arkansas Press: Arkansas.

Chew, D. (2009), "Feminism and multiculturalism in Quebec: an/other perspective."

*Canadian Woman Studies*, vol. 27, no. 2-3, 2009, p. 84+. Expanded Academic ASAP,

[go.galegroup.com.ezproxy3.lib.le.ac.uk/ps/i.do?p=EAIM&sw=w&u=leicester&v=2.1&it=r&id=GALE%7CA225074541&asid=b92d284a8882b6a29b111b599ca6e68b](http://go.galegroup.com.ezproxy3.lib.le.ac.uk/ps/i.do?p=EAIM&sw=w&u=leicester&v=2.1&it=r&id=GALE%7CA225074541&asid=b92d284a8882b6a29b111b599ca6e68b).

(Accessed 10/30/2017).

Cho, G.M. (2008), *Haunting the Korean Diaspora: Shame, Secrecy, and the Forgotten War*.

University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis.

- Chun, H. & Mobley, M. (2014), *J Primary Prevent* 35: 339. <https://doi-org.ezproxy4.lib.le.ac.uk/10.1007/s10935-014-0359-y>. (Accessed 02/20/2019).
- Cohen, R. (2008), *Global Diaspora: An Introduction*. Routledge: London.
- Coles, Roberta L. (2016), *Race and Family: A Structural Approach*. Rowman and Littlefield: Maryland.
- Cupic, S. (2003), "The Politics of Representation as a Projection of Identity: The Female Body in the Oriental Construction in Serbian Art". *European Journal of Women Studies*, [e-Journal] 10, pp. 321-34. Available through: The University of Leicester Digital Library. <<http://www2.le.ac.uk/library>>
- Curtiss, R.H. & Hanley, D.C. (2001, July), "Dr. Jack Shaheen Discusses Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People". *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*, 20(5), 103. Retrieved from <http://link.galegroup.com.ezproxy3.lib.le.ac.uk/apps/doc/A76737094/EAIM?u=leicester&sid=EAIM&xid=f8872b14>
- Cushman, T. (2005), *A Matter of Principle: Humanitarian Arguments for War in Iraq*, University of California Press, 2005. ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/leicester/detail.action?docID=254871>. Created from Leicester on 2018-03-22 23:40:55.
- Danchev, A. & MacMillan, J. (2004), *The Iraq War and Democratic Politics*, Taylor & Francis Group, 2004. ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/leicester/detail.action?docID=199596>. Created from Leicester on 2018-03-22 23:58:48.
- Daniels, R.G. (1993), "Trauma and English Literature", *Humanities and Medicine, The Journal of Emergency Medicine*, Vol. 11, pp. 113-115. (Accessed 06/07/2016), The University of Leicester Digital Library.



- Darraj, S.M. (2002), "Understanding the other sister: The case of Arab feminism." *Monthly Review*, Mar. p. 15+. Expanded Academic ASAP,  
go.galegroup.com.ezproxy3.lib.le.ac.uk/ps/i.do?p=EAIM&sw=w&u=leicester&v=2.1&it=r&id=GALE%7CA84184713&asid=0c5e571b16a5a57b20326f66f551ff9e.  
(Accessed 01/28/ 2017).
- Darwish, M. (2013), *Memory for Forgetfulness*. August, Beirut 1982, University of California Press, Berkeley. Available from: ProQuest Ebook Central. (11/08/2017).
- Darwish, M. (no date), "To My Mother", in PoemHunter.com, Available  
<http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/to-my-mother-45/>
- Davie, G. and Vincent, J. (1998), "Religion and old age," *Ageing and Society*. Cambridge University Press, 18(1), pp. 101–110.
- Davis, H.E., Zine, Jasmin, and Taylor, Lisa K. (2007), "An interview with Mohja Kahf," *Intercultural education*, Vol. 18, No. 4, pp. 383-388.
- De Clercq, E. (2013), *The Seduction of the Female Body: Women's Rights in Need of a New Body Politics*. Palgrave Macmillan: Hampshire.
- Destruction of Cultural Heritage (2014), *Global Policy Forum Online*.  
<https://www.globalpolicy.org/humanitarian-issues-in-iraq/consequences-of-the-war-and-occupation-of-iraq/destruction-of-iraqs-cultural-heritage.html>
- Diprose, R. (2005), *The Bodies of Women*. Taylor and Francis. ProQuest Ebook Central,  
<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com.ezproxy3.lib.le.ac.uk/lib/leicester/detail.action?docID=242132>.
- Dorothée, (2013), Paris Select Online. Available: <https://www.parisselectbook.com/en/one-thousand-and-one-nights-at-the-arab-world-institute/> (Accessed 08/01/2018).
- Dreifuss-Kattan, E. (2016), *Art and Mourning: The Role of Creativity in Healing Trauma and Loss*, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016. ProQuest Ebook Central,

<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/leicester/detail.action?docID=4443630>.

Created from Leicester on 2018-03-19 03:37:31.

- Dulin-Keita, A., Hannon Iii, L., Fernandez, J., & Cockerham, W. (2011), "The defining moment: children's conceptualization of race and experiences with racial discrimination", *Ethnic & Racial Studies*, 34, 4, pp. 662-682, Criminal Justice Abstracts with Full Text, EBSCOhost, (Accessed 10/30/2017).
- Eckstein, J. (2011), "Reasons for Staying in Intimately Violent Relationships: Comparisons of Men and Women and Messages Communicated to Self and Others", *Journal Of Family Violence*, 26, 1, pp. 21-30, Criminal Justice Abstracts with Full Text, EBSCOhost, (Accessed 01/09/2018).
- Eisenhandler, Susan A. (2008), "Religion is the Finding Thing", *Journal of Gerontological Social Work*, 45:1-2, pp. 85-103, DOI: 10.1300/J083v45n01\_06
- El-Aswad, E.S. (2006), "The Dynamics of Identity Reconstruction among Arab Communities in the United States". *Anthropos*, 101(1), pp. 111-121. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy4.lib.le.ac.uk/stable/40466623> (Accessed 01/09/2018).
- Elia, N. (2006), "Islamophobia and the 'Privileging' of Arab American Women" *NWST Journal*, Vol. 18, No. 3. *Feminist Perspectives on Peace and War: before and after 9/11*, pp. 151-161.
- El Said, M. (2003), "The face of the enemy: Arab-American writing post-9/11," *Studies in the Humanities*, Indiana U Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania.
- Elmaz Abinader. (2014), <http://www.elmazabinader.com>
- El Sakakkini, W. (1982), *First among Sufis: the life and thought of Rabia al-Adawiyya, the woman Saint of Basra*. Translated by: Nabil Safwat (2009). Octagon Press: London.
- El-Shamy, H.M. (1976), "Folktales of Egypt". University of Chicago: Chicago. EUMC (2006), *Muslims in the European Union Discrimination and Islamophobia*. European

- Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia. Austria: MANZ CROSSMEDIA GmbH & Co KG. 2006 – 115 pp.
- Enderwitz, S. (2004), "Shahrazâd Is One of Us: Practical Narrative, Theoretical Discussion, and Feminist Discourse." *Marvels & Tales* 18, no. 2 . pp. 187-200.  
<http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy4.lib.le.ac.uk/stable/41388707>. (Accessed 01/09/2016).
- Faragallah, Mona H., Schum, Walter R., and Webb, Farrell J. (1997), "Acculturation of Arab-American immigrants: An Explorative study," *Journal of comparative family studies*. Vol. 28. pp. 182-203.
- Ferguson, M., Salter, M., and Stallworthy, J., (2005), *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, (2005), Fifth edition. (pp. 1430-31). W. W. Norton and Company: New York.
- Fekete, L. (2006), "Enlightened Fundamentalism? Immigration, Feminism, and the Right." *Race and Class*, [e-journal] 48, pp. 1-22. Available through: The University of Leicester Digital Library. <<http://www2.le.ac.uk/library>> (Accessed 12/08/2017).
- Ferris, E. (2008), "The Looming Crisis: Displacement and Security in Iraq", *Foreign Policy at Brookings*. N.5. Brookings Online.
- France 24 (2014), <http://www.france24.com/ar/20140730-الحرب-الاهلية-ما-زال-ت-حاضرة-في-السنيما-اللبنانية-بعد-24-عاما-على-انتهائها>
- Frazier, JW, & Margai, FM (eds) 2010, *Multicultural Geographies: The Changing Racial/Ethnic Patterns of the United States*, State University of New York Press, Albany. Available from: ProQuest Ebook Central. (Accessed 13 February 2019).
- Freeman, G.P. (2009), "Immigration, Diversity, and Welfare Chauvinism," *The Forum*: Vol. 7: Iss. 3, Article 7. DOI:10.2202/1540-8884.1317
- Freud, S. (1920), "Beyond the Pleasure Principle", in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (1962), *Beyond the Pleasure Principle: Group*

- Psychology and Other Works*. Vol. XVIII. Trans. Strachey, J. London: The Hogarth Press.
- Gardiner, S.L. and Garner, A.R. (2010), "Relationships of War: Mothers, Soldiers, Knowledge", in Chandler, R.M and Wang, L. and Fuller, L. *Women, War, and Violence: Personal Perspectives and Global Activism*. Palgrave: New York.
- Gibson, S. (2009), "The Curry Mile: Placing taste, tasting place in Manchester." *Moving Worlds*, Vol. 9, University of Leeds: Leeds.
- Giacamen, R. *et al.* (2007), "Humiliation: the Invisible Trauma of War for Palestinian Youth", *Journal of the Royal Institute for Public Health*. Vol. 121, pp. 563-571. Elsevier. (Accessed 06/07/2016), The University of Leicester Digital Library.
- Giddens, A. (1987), *The Nation-State and Violence*. University of California State: Berkeley. [Google Book].
- Gilroy, P. (2002), *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Verso: London. [Google Book].
- Gilroy, P. (2004), *Between Camps: Nations, Cultures, and the Allure of Race*. Taylor & Francis Group, Florence. Available from: ProQuest Ebook Central. (Accessed 02/02/2019).
- Gostečnik, C., Slavič, T.R., Lukek, S.P. *et al.* (2014), "Trauma and Religiousness". *Journal of Religion and Health* (2014) 53: 690. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-012-9665-y>
- Gualtieri, S. (2009), *Between Arab and White: Race and Ethnicity in the Early Syrian American Diaspora*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Habib, M. (2013), "Writing Palestinian Exile: The Politics of Displacement in the Narratives of Mahmoud Darwish, Mourid Barghouti, Raja Shehadeh and Fawaz Turki". *Holy Land Studies*, Volume 12 Issue 1, Page 71-90, ISSN 1474-9475 (Accessed 05/13/2013).

- Hackforth-Jones, J. and Roberts, M. (2005), *Edges of Empire: Orientalism and Visual Culture*. Malden, MA ; Oxford : Blackwell Pub.
- Haddad, Y. (2004), “Not quite American?: The shaping of Arab and Muslim identity in the United States”. Vol. 26 of Edmondson Lectures. Baylore U Press: Texas.
- Haddad, Y. (2011), *Becoming American?: The Forging of Arab and Muslim Identity In Pluralist America*, Baylor University Press, Waco. Available from: ProQuest Ebook Central. (Accessed 06/24/2018).
- Halaby, L. (2012), *My Name on His Tongue*. Syracuse: New York.
- Halliday, F. (2013), in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Nationalism*, edited by Breuilly, John.: Oxford University Press, pp. 435-453.  
<http://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199209194.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199209194>.
- Hall, S. (1990), “Cultural identity and diaspora”, *Framework*. No 36, 222-237.  
middlebury.edu
- Hamdar, A. (2014), *The Female Suffering Body: Illness and Disability in Modern Arabic Literature*. Syracuse University Press: New York.
- Hamed, C. T., Bollahi, M. A., Abdelhamid, I. , Med Mahmoud, M. A., BA, B. , Ghaber, S. , Habti, N. and Houmeida, A. (2012), “Frequencies and ethnic distribution of ABO and Rh(D) blood groups in Mauritania: results of first nationwide study”. *International Journal of Immunogenetics*, 39: 151-154. doi:10.1111/j.1744-313X.2011.01064.x
- Handal, N. (2001), *The Poetry of Arab Women: A Contemporary Anthology*. Interlink books: New York.
- Hanna, A. (2010), “The First World War According to the Memories of ‘Commoners’ in The Bilad Al-Sham” in Beckert S. *et al.* in *World in World Wars: Experiences, Perceptions*

- and Perspectives from Africa and Asia* 2010, BRILL, Leiden. Available from: ProQuest Ebook Central.
- Hansen, M.L. (1938), *The Problem of the Third Generation Immigrant*. Augustana Book Concern: Illinois. Available from <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/inu.30000118510415>. (Accessed 06/24/2018).
- Harb, S. (2009), Rev. of *E-Mails from Scheherazad*, by Mohja Kahf. In: *Al-Raida [The Pioneer]*, Winter 2009, pp. 65-68.
- Harb, S. (2012), "Arab American Women's Writing and September 11: Contrapuntality and Associative Remembering". *MELUS*, 37(3), pp. 13-41. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy3.lib.le.ac.uk/stable/23273792>
- Harms, G. and Ferry, T. (2008), *The Palestine Israeli Conflict: A Basic Introduction*. Pluto Press: London.
- Harris, J. Irene *et al.* (2012), "Coping Functions of Prayer and Posttraumatic Growth", *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, pp. 26-38, Routledge. The University of Leicester Digital Library. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10508610903418103>
- Hartman, M. (2006), "'This Sweet / Sweet Music': Jazz, Sam Cooke, and Reading Arab American Literary Identities", *MELUS*, 31(4), pp. 145-165. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy3.lib.le.ac.uk/stable/30029687>
- Hartwig, M.J. (2009), *The Poetics of Intimacy and the Problem of Sexual Abstinence*. Peter Lang Publishing: New York.
- Hassan, W. (2008), "The Rise of Arab-American Literature: Orientalism and Cultural Translation in the Work of Ameen Rihani", *American Literary History*, 20(1/2), pp. 245-275. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20492219>
- Hastie, R. (1997), *Disabled Children in a Society at War: A Casebook from Bosnia*. OXFAM: Oxford.

- Hatem, M.F. (1998), "The Invisible American Half: Arab American: Hybridity and Feminist Discourses in the 1990s", *Talking Visions: Multicultural Feminism in a Transnational Age*. Ella Shohat (ed). NY: The MIT Press. pp. 369-390.
- Hendricks, N.J. *et al.* (2007), "Beyond the Numbers: Hate Crimes and Cultural Trauma Within Arab American Immigrant Communities", *International Review of Victimology*, 14: 95. pp. 95-113. SAGE. (Accessed 06/07/2016), The University of Leicester Digital Library.
- Hezbollah (2014), *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*.  
<http://global.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/264741/Hezbollah>
- Holly, A. (1994), "Fairuz." *New Statesman & Society* 18 Mar. 1994: 51+. Expanded Academic ASAP.
- Honko, L. (1995), "Traditions in the construction of cultural identity and strategies of ethnic survival." *European Review*, 3, pp. 131-146 doi:10.1017/S1062798700001435
- Horvitz, D.M. (2000), *Literary Trauma: SADISM, Memory, and Sexual Violence in American Women's Fiction*. State University of New York Press: New York.
- Houck-Loomis, T. (2012), "Good God?!? Lamentations as a Model for Mourning the Loss of the Good God", *Journal of Religion and Health*, 51(3), pp. 701-708. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy4.lib.le.ac.uk/stable/41653860>
- Hout, S. C. (2008), "The Tears of Trauma: Memories of Home, War, Exile in Rabih Alameddine's "I, the Divine." *World Literature Today*. Vol. 82, No. 5. pp. 58-62. JSTOR. (Accessed 07/05/2015), The University of Leicester Digital Library.
- Hughes, L. (1921), "The Negro Speaks of Rivers", in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, (2005), Fifth edition. (pp. 1430-31). Edited by Ferguson, M., Salter, M., and Stallworthy, J., W. W. Norton and Company: New York.

- Huntington, S. (1993), "The Clash of Civilization?". *Foreign Affairs*, [online] Available through < <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/48950/samuel-p-huntington/the-clash-of-civilizations>> (Accessed 04, 2013).
- Ibn Alkhatib, Lisan adDin. *Alihata fi Akhbar Ghornata. الإحاطة في أخبار غرناطة*. Vol. 3. Alkhanji: Cairo.
- Ibn al-Sai. (no date). *Nessau al-Khulafa نساء الخلفاء (The Consorts of the Caliphs)* Translated by Shawkat M. Toorawa (2017), New York University Press: New York.
- Imam, H. (2010), "Aftermath of U.S. Invasions: The Anguish of Women in Afghanistan and Iraq". In: Chandler R.M., Wang L., Fuller L.K. (eds) *Women, War, and Violence*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York.
- Impacts, Review Mikhail, D. *The War Works Hard* (2005). *The Literature of War*. Volume 3. p. 217. (Accessed 05/06/2017), The University of Leicester Digital Library.
- "Iraq's body count". (2006). *New Scientist*, 192(2574), 6. Retrieved from <http://link.galegroup.com.ezproxy3.lib.le.ac.uk/apps/doc/A154005397/EAIM?u=leicester&sid=EAIM&xid=b36072e3>.
- Iraq Prison Abuse Scandal (2013). *CNN*. <http://edition.cnn.com/2013/10/30/world/meast/iraq-prison-abuse-scandal-fast-facts/>
- Irwin, R. (2006), Preface. In: Y. Yamanaka and T. Nishio, eds. *The Arabian Nights and Orientalism: Perspectives from East and West*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2006. pp. vii-xiii
- Jackson, R. L. and Hogg, M. A. (2010), 'Hybridity', in Jackson, RL & Hogg, MA (eds), *Encyclopedia of identity*, SAGE Publications, Inc., Thousand Oaks, CA, pp. 338-339, (Accessed 02/02/2019), doi: 10.4135/9781412979306.n109.
- "Jamil Buthayna Jamil bin Mouamar" Ba'albki, Muneer, 1992. *معجم أعلام المورد*. [A Dictionary of Biographies]. Beirut: Darul Ilm lil Malaeen.



- Jenkins, W. J *et al.* (2012), "An Examination of Post 9-11 Attitudes Towards Arab Americans", *North American Journal of Psychology*. Vol. 14, No. 1, pp. 77-84. (Accessed 04/07/2016), The University of Leicester Digital Library.
- Joris, P, & Tengour, H. (2013), *Poems for the Millennium*, Volume Four: The University of California Book of North African Literature, University of California Press, Berkeley. Available from: ProQuest Ebook Central. (Accessed 05/20/2018).
- Jourde, C. (2001). "Ethnicity, Democratization, and Political Dramas: Insights into Ethnic Politics in Mauritania". *African Issues*, 29(1/2), 26-30. doi:10.2307/1167106
- Kahf, M. (1998), *Western Representation of the Muslim Woman: From Termagant to Odalisque*. University of Texas Press: Austin.
- Kahf, M. in Akash, M. and Mattawa, K. (1999), "More Than One Way to Break a Fast." Post Gi-bran: Anthology of New Arab American Writing. Syracuse: Syracuse UP. p. 263.
- Kahf, M. (2003), *Emails from Scheherazad*. UFP: Florida.
- Kahf, M. (2000), "Politics and Erotics in Nizar Kabbani's Poetry: From the Sultan's Wife to the Lady Friend." *World Literature Today*, 74(1), pp. 44-52. doi:10.2307/40155307.
- Kahf, M. (2013), "A Man's Chest" in *Patheos: Hosting the Conversation on Faith*. Online. Available at : <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/loveinshallah/2013/09/09/a-mans-chest/>. (Accessed 03/23/ 2017).
- Kalfoglou, A.L. and Scott, J. and Hudson, K. (2008), "Attitudes about Preconception Sex Selection: A Focus Group Study with Americans". *Human Reproduction*, [e-Journal] 23, pp. 2731-2736. Available through: The University of Leicester Digital Library. <<http://www2.le.ac.uk/library>>
- Katoti, S.A. (2012), "Arab American women, mental health, and feminism." *Journal of women and social work*. Vol.27, No 1, pp. 60-70.

- Kaufer, D., & Al-Malki, A. (2009), "The War on Terror through Arab-American Eyes: The Arab-American Press as a Rhetorical Counterpublic". *Rhetoric Review*, 28(1), pp. 47-65. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy3.lib.le.ac.uk/stable/25655929>
- Khadim, A. (2010), "Widows' Doomsday: Women and War in the Poetry of Hassan al-Naser", in Shirazi, F. *Muslim Women in War and Crisis: Representation and Reality*. U of Texas Press: Austin.
- Kirby, A. (2017), "How a refugee from Syria built an award-winning U.K. business" *CNN Money*. <http://money.cnn.com/2017/06/27/smallbusiness/syria-refugee-dama-cheese-razan-alsous/index.html> Online. (Accessed 11/10/2017).
- Kok, M. and Welsh, J. (2001), "Food, identity, and the immigrant experience," Publication from Center of Studies in Food Security Contributors. Ryerson University Online.
- Krause, N. (2009), "Lifetime Trauma, Prayer, and Psychological Distress in Late Life". *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, Vo. 19, pp. 55–72, Routledge. The University of Leicester Digital Library DOI: 10.1080/10508610802471112
- Kulczycki, A. and Lobo, P. (2001), "Deepening the melting pot: Arab-American at the turn of the century," *Middle East journal*, Vol. 55, No. 3, pp. 459-473
- Kurth, N.G. and Brogan, D. (1974), "An Investigation of Sex-Related Slang Vocabulary and Sex-Role Orientation among Male and Female University Students". *Journal of Marriage and Family*, [e-Journal] 36, pp. 474-484. Available through: The University of Leicester Digital Library. <<http://www2.le.ac.uk/library>>
- Kuykendall, R. (2005), *Social Crisis and Social Demoralization: The Dynamics of Status in American Race Relations*. Arissa media group, LLC. Digital Edition through The University of Leicester Digital Library.
- Lambert-Hurley, S. (2014), "To Write of the Conjugal Act: Intimacy and Sexuality in Muslim Women's Autobiographical Writing in South Asia", *Journal of the History of*

- Sexuality*, 23(2), pp. 155-181. Retrieved from  
<http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy3.lib.le.ac.uk/stable/24616488>
- Larose, C. (2018), *Arab American Women's Poetry: Violence and Boundaries in the Levantine Diaspora*. PhD thesis. University of Michigan. Available at:  
[https://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/bitstream/handle/2027.42/143994/clarose\\_1.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/bitstream/handle/2027.42/143994/clarose_1.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y) (Accessed: 02/25/2019).
- Law, I. (2010), *Racism and Ethnicity: Global Debates, Dilemmas, Directions*. London: Routledge.
- Lewis, R. (2004), *Rethinking Orientalism: Women Travel and The Ottoman Harem*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2004.
- Lewis, T. and Macmaster, N. (1998), "Orientalism: from Unveiling to Hyperveiling". *Journal of European Studies*, [e-journal] 28. p121+ Available through: The University of Leicester Digital Library. <<http://www2.le.ac.uk/library>>
- Lisan Alarab. Abilfadl Jamaludien Ibn Manzur. (no date), *لسان العرب لأبي الفضل جمال الدين بن منظور*. Vol. I. Dar Sadir: Beirut.
- Ludescher, T. (2006), From Nostalgia to Critique: An Overview of Arab American Literature. *MELUS*, 31(4), pp. 93-114. Retrieved from  
<http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy3.lib.le.ac.uk/stable/30029684>
- Macintosh, H.B. (2017), "A Bridge Across Silent Trauma: Enactment, Art, and Emergence in the Treatment of a Traumatized Adolescence", *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, 27:4, pp. 433-453, DOI: 10.1080/10481885.2017.1328188
- Mail Online*, (2017), "From fleeing Syria to dazzling Merkel in the kitchen",  
<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/afp/article-4908820/From-fleeing-Syria-dazzling-Merkel-kitchen.html> (Accessed 11/10/2017).

- Majaj, L.S. (2006), "New Directions: Arab American Writing Today", *Ibero-Amerikanisches Institut*. Available at: [http://publications.iai.spk-berlin.de/servlets/MCRFileNodeServlet/Document\\_derivate\\_00001246/BIA\\_110\\_123\\_136.pdf](http://publications.iai.spk-berlin.de/servlets/MCRFileNodeServlet/Document_derivate_00001246/BIA_110_123_136.pdf) (Accessed: 07/23/2017).
- Makdisi, S., and F.N. (2008), Introduction. In: *The Arabian Nights in Historical Context: Between East and West*. S. Makdisi and F. Nussbaum, eds. Oxford: Oxford U.P. pp. 265-295.
- Mankowitz, Z.W. (2002), *Life Between Memory and Hope: The Survivors of the Holocaust in Occupied Germany*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.
- Mausoat AlHadeeth. *موسوعة الحديث* Verse No. 339. *Islamweb Online*. [library.islamweb.net](http://library.islamweb.net)
- Mason, P.L. & Matella, A. (2014), "Stigmatization and racial selection after September 11, 2001: self-identity among Arab and Islamic Americans", *IZA J Migration* 3: 20. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40176-014-0020-9>.
- Matsuda, MK. (2012), *Pacific Worlds: A History of Seas, Peoples, and Cultures*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. Available from: ProQuest Ebook Central. (Accessed 26/02/2019].
- McGrath, B. (2003). "WAR GAME". *The New Yorker*, 79(22), 025. Retrieved from <http://link.galegroup.com.ezproxy3.lib.le.ac.uk/apps/doc/A108878747/EAIM?u=leicester&sid=EAIM&xid=3024667b>. (Accessed 20/02/2019).
- Meijer, R. and Butenschon, N. (2017), *The Crisis of Citizenship in the Arab World*. Brill.
- Meisenhelder, J.B. and Marcum, J.P (2009), "Terrorism, Post-traumatic Stress, Coping Strategies, and Spiritual Outcomes", *Journal of Religion and Health*, Vol. 48, No. 1, pp. 46-57. *Springer. JSTOR*. (Accessed 05/06/2016), The University of Leicester Digital Library.
- Merriam Webster. Online. <http://www.merriam-webster.com>

- Memmi, A. (1999), *Racism*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis. Available from: ProQuest Ebook Central. (Accessed 02/02/2019).
- Milliken, R. (2012), *Ambiguous Locks: An Iconology of Hair in Medieval Art and Literature*. McFarland and Company Inc.: London.
- Mir, S. (2013), "Palestinian Literature: Occupation and Exile". *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 35(2), 110-129. doi:10.13169/arabstudquar.35.2.0110
- Miscamble, W.D. (2011), *The Most Controversial Decision: Truman, the Atomic Bombs, and the Defeat of Japan*, Cambridge University Press, New York. Available from: ProQuest Ebook Central. (Accessed 03/15/2018).
- Moqbel, N. (2014), *Arab American Poetry 1967-Present: Songs of Defiance and Hope in the Face of Arab-US Political Tension*. PhD thesis. Middle Tennessee State University. Available at:  
[https://jewlscholar.mtsu.edu/bitstream/handle/mtsu/4332/Moqbel\\_mtsu\\_0170E\\_10346.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://jewlscholar.mtsu.edu/bitstream/handle/mtsu/4332/Moqbel_mtsu_0170E_10346.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y)
- "More than one way to break a fast." By Mohja Kahf. Online publication. Available:  
<http://planetgrenada.blogspot.com/2010/07/more-than-one-way-to-break-fast.html>
- Morris, P. (2013), "The Depiction of Trauma and its Effect on Character Development in the Brontë Fiction", *Brontë Studies*, 38:2, pp. 157-168,  
DOI:10.1179/1474893213Z.000000000062 (Accessed 03/15/2018)
- Nash, G. (1998), *The Arab Writers in English: Arab Themes in a Metropolitan Language, 1908–1958*. Sussex Academic Press: Brighton.
- Nash, G. (2007), *The Anglo-Arab Encounter: Fiction and Autobiography by Arab Writers in English*. Peter Lang: Oxford.

- Nash, G. (2009), *Travellers to the Middle East from Burckhardt to Thesiger: An Anthology*, Anthem Press, London. Available from: ProQuest Ebook Central. (Accessed 07/05/2018).
- Nash, G. (2012), *Writing Muslim Identity: The Construction of Identity*. Continuum: London.
- Nelson, I.S. (2015), *Ethnic American Literature: An Encyclopedia for Students*. Greenwood: California.
- Neumann, I. (2012), "Introduction to the Forum on Liminality," *Review of International Studies*. Cambridge University Press, 38(2), pp. 473–479. doi: 10.1017/S0260210511000817.
- Nikro, N.S. (2012), *The Fragmenting Force of Memory: Self, Literary Style, and Civil War in Lebanon*. Cambridge Scholar Publishing: New Castle.
- Notley, A. (2005), *Coming After: Essays on Poetry*. The University of Michigan Press: Ann Arbor.
- Nuru-Jeter, A., Dominguez, T., Hammond, W., Leu, J., Skaff, M., Egerter, S, Jones, C., & Braveman, P. (2009), "It's the skin you're in': African-American women talk about their experiences of racism. An exploratory study to develop measures of racism for birth outcome studies', *Maternal & Child Health Journal*, 13, 1, pp. 29-39, CINAHL Plus with Full Text, EBSCOhost, (Accessed 10/30/2017).
- Nye, Naomi S. (1997), *Habibi*. Simon Pulse: New York.
- Nye, Naomi S. (2002), *19 Varieties of Gazelles*. Greenwillow: New York.
- Nye, Naomi S. (2005), *You and Yours*. BOA Editions: New York.
- Nye, Naomi S. (2011), *Transfer*. BOA Editions: New York.
- Olivier, B. (2008), "Trauma and Literature: Derrida, 9/11 and Hart's the Reconstructionist", *Journal of Literary Studies*, 24:1, pp. 32-57. Routledge. The University of Leicester Digital Library.

- Orfalea, G. (1982), *Wrapping the Grape Leaves: A Sheaf of Contemporary Arab-American*, American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee: Washington.
- Orfalea, G. and Elmusa, S. (1998), *Grape leaves: A Century of Arab-American Poetry*, University of Utah Press: Salt Lake City UT.
- Orfalea, G. (2006), "The Arab American novel". *MELUS*, 31(4), 115+. Retrieved from <http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/A161922247/EAIM?u=leicester&sid=EAIM&xid=da298c44>
- Oxford English Dictionary: The definitive record of the English language. Online book. (Accessed 06/06/2017), The University of Leicester Digital Library.
- Parini, J. (2008), *Why Poetry Matters*. International Publishing Solution: United States.
- Peach, Lucinda J. (2001) "Is Violence Male? The Law, Gender, and Violence". *Women, War, and Resistance: Frontline Feminism*. Routledge: New York and London. pp. 58-72.
- Pearce, L., Fowler, C. and Crawshaw, R. (2013), *Postcolonial Manchester: Diaspora space and devolution of literary culture*. Manchester U Press: Manchester.
- Petersen, J. and Hyde, J. (2011), "Gender Differences in Sexual Attitudes and Behaviors: A Review of Meta-Analytic Results and Large Datasets." *The Journal of Sex Research*, 48:3-2. pp. 149-165.
- Pharaon, N.A. (2008), "The interface of psychic trauma and cultural identity within Arab American groups post=9/11," *Easter group psychotherapy society*. Vol. 32, No. 3, pp. 223-234
- Poe, E.A. (1838), "Ligeia", *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, Vol. 1. pp.1376-1386, W.W. Norton: New York, 1989.
- Pokhrel, A. K. (2015), Re-(en)visioning "the vanishing of the past": Myth, Art, and Women in A. S. Byatt's "Medusa's Ankles" and "Art Work", *Women's Studies*, 44:3, 392-424, DOI: 10.1080/00497878.2015.1009763. (Accessed 15/02/2019)

- Pottie, K., Dahal, G., Georgiades, K. et al. (2015), "Do First Generation Immigrant Adolescents Face Higher Rates of Bullying, Violence and Suicidal Behaviours Than Do Third Generation and Native Born?" *J Immigrant Minority Health* 17: 1557.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10903-014-0108-6>. (Accessed 02/20/2019).
- Priest, N., King, T., Bécaries, L. & Kavanagh, A. (2016), "Bullying Victimization and Racial Discrimination Among Australian Children", *American Journal Of Public Health*, 106, 10, pp. 1882-1884, CINAHL Plus with Full Text, EBSCOhost, (Accessed 11/19/2017).
- Procter, J. (2003), *Dwelling Places: Postwar black British writing*. Manchester U Press: Manchester.
- Pyrke, L.M. (2017), *Ishtar. Gods and Heroes of the Ancient World*. Routledge: London.
- Qabbani, N. (1985), "مواطنون دونما وطن" [Natives without Home]. Available at:  
<http://www.adab.com/modules.php?name=Sh3er&doWhat=shqas&qid=68950&r=&rc=>  
 (2005).
- "Quais bin alMulawwah" Ba'albki, Muneer, (1992), *معجم أعلام الموردين* [A Dictionary of Biographies]. Beirut: Darul Ilm lil Malaeen.
- Rajaratnam, R. (2009), "Contemporary British poetry and the transcultural imagination," *Moving Worlds*, Vol. 9, University of Leeds: Leeds.
- Ramachandran, T. (2009), "No woman left covered: unveiling and the politics of liberation in multi/interculturalism." *Canadian Woman Studies*, vol. 27, no. 2-3, 2009, p. 33+.  
 Expanded Academic ASAP,  
[go.galegroup.com.ezproxy3.lib.le.ac.uk/ps/i.do?p=EAIM&sw=w&u=leicester&v=2.1&it=r&id=GALE%7CA225074527&asid=bd0441e34021500215e608ae784806b2](http://go.galegroup.com.ezproxy3.lib.le.ac.uk/ps/i.do?p=EAIM&sw=w&u=leicester&v=2.1&it=r&id=GALE%7CA225074527&asid=bd0441e34021500215e608ae784806b2).  
 (Accessed 10/30/2017).
- Rattansi, A. (2007), *Racism: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.  
 Available from: ProQuest Ebook Central. (Accessed 02/02/2019).



- Reynolds, D.F. (2015), *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Arab Culture*. Cambridge U. P.: Cambridge.
- Richa, S. and Richa, N. (2015), "Pigeon Cave: A Legendary Place of Suicide in Lebanon." *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 172(1), p. 16. Published Online <http://dx.doi.org/10.1176/appi.ajp.2014.14091134>
- Rimalt, N. (2007), "Women in the sphere of masculinity: The double-edged sword of women's integration in the military". *Duke Journal of Gender Law Policy* 14(2), pp. 1097-1120.
- Ripley, T. (1996), *Air War in Bosnia*. Air Life Publishing Ltd: England.
- Ritzenhoff, K.A. and Kazecki, J. (2014), *Heroism and Gender in War Films*. Palgrave Macmillan: New York. (Accessed 06/05/2017), The University of Leicester Digital Library.
- Roberts, M. (2005), "Cultural Crossings: Sartorial Adventures, Satiric Narratives, and the Question of Indigenous Agency in the Nineteenth-Century Europe and the Near East." *Edges of Empire: Orientalism and Visual Culture*. Ed. Jocelyn Hackforth-Jones, and Mary Roberts. Oxford: Blackwell, 2005. pp. 70-94.
- Robertson, L. (2014), Etel Adnan. *BOMB*, (127), pp. 102-107. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy3.lib.le.ac.uk/stable/24365709>
- Ruschkowski, K. (2017), "The Many Worlds of Etel Adnan". *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 39(3), 77-81. The MIT Press. Retrieved from Project MUSE database, (Accessed 06/04/2018).
- Said, E. (1979), *Orientalism*. Vintage Books: New York.
- Salaita, S. (2005), "Ethnic Identity and Imperative Patriotism: Arab Americans before and after 9/11". *College Literature*, 32(2), pp. 146-168. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy3.lib.le.ac.uk/stable/25115271>

- Salaita, S. (2006), *Anti-Arab Racism in the USA: Where It Comes from and What It means for Politics*. Pluto Press. Digital edition (Accessed 05/06/2017), The University of Leicester Digital Library.
- Salaita, S. (2007), *Arab American Literary Fictions, Cultures, and Politics*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York. Available from: ProQuest Ebook Central. (05/08/2018).
- Salaita, S. (2011), *Modern Arab American Fiction: A Reader's Guide*, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse. Available from: ProQuest Ebook Central. (06/25/2018).
- Salhi, Z. S. (2006), "Introduction: defining the Arab Diaspora", *The Arab Diaspora: Voices of an anguished scream*. Routledge: London.
- Sami, K. (2009), *أناشيد العودة* [Songs of Return]. Majdalawi Books: Amman.
- Sandoval, J. Miguel and Jendrysik, M. (1993), "CONVERGENCE AND DIVERGENCE IN ARAB-AMERICAN PUBLIC OPINION", *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, Volume 5, Issue 4, pp. 303–314, <https://doi-org.ezproxy4.lib.le.ac.uk/10.1093/ijpor/5.4.303-a>
- Sarat, A. and Kearns, T. (1995), *Cultural Pluralism, Identity Politics, and the Law*. University of Michigan Press. Digital Edition, (Accessed 05/06/2017), The University of Leicester Digital Library.
- Schwab, G. (2009), "Replacement Children: The Transgenerational Transmission of Traumatic Loss." *American Imago. Muse Project*. Vol. 66, N. 3, pp. 277-310. John Hopkins U Press. (Accessed 10/06/2015), The University of Leicester Digital Library.
- Shabout, N. (2010), "Images and Status: Visualizing Iraqi Women", in Shirazi, F. *Muslim Women in War and Crisis: Representation and Reality*. U of Texas Press: Austin.
- Shaheen, J. (2009), *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*. Olive Branch Press: Massachusetts.

- Shakir, E. (1991), "Arab Mothers, American Sons: Women in Arab-American Autobiographies". *MELUS*, 17(3), 5-15. doi:10.2307/467236
- Shallcross, A, Ford, B, Floerke, V, & Mauss, I. (2013), "Getting better with age: The relationship between age, acceptance, and negative affect", *Journal Of Personality And Social Psychology*, 104, 4, pp. 734-749, PsycARTICLES, EBSCOhost, (Accessed 03/22/2018).
- Shannon, J.H. (2015), *Performing al-Andalus: Music and Nostalgia across the Mediterranean*. Indiana University Press: Bloomington.
- Shay, O. (2015), "To Switch or Not to Switch: Code-switching in a Multilingual Country", *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, Volume 209, pp. 462-469, ISSN 1877-0428, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2015.11.253>. (Accessed 10/05/2016), LU Online.
- Sherman, J. (2004), *Storytelling: An Encyclopaedia of Mythology and Folklore*. [e-book] New York: Sharp References.
- Shirazi, F. (2010), *Muslim Women in War and Crisis: Representation and Reality*. U of Texas Press: Austin.
- Sliman, Elham (no date) "Bridging Arab American diaspora: A case for social support programming," Center for public policy administration capstones, University of Massachusetts: Amherst.
- Smith, A. (1988), *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*. Blackwell Publishing: Oxford.
- Smith, S. (2007), *Poetry and Displacement*, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool. Available from: ProQuest Ebook Central. (Accessed 07/15/2017).
- Solomon, A. (2016), *Far and Away: Reporting from the Brink of Change*. Scribner: New York. [Google Book].
- So You Think You Can Dance*. [TV programme] FOX Broadcasting Company.

- Spivak, G. C., (1988), "Can the Subaltern Speak", in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*. Edited by William, B. and Chrisman, L., (1993). Harvester Wheatsheaf: London.
- Stedman, G. (2006), 'Pox on your raggi, your supos, and your Catlotti': Literature, cultural exchange and gastronomic chauvinism in Early Modern England, *European Journal of English Studies*, 10:3, 269-281, DOI: 10.1080/13825570600967739
- Steet, L. (1996), "Gender and Orientalism: 'National Geographic's' Arab Women." *The High School Journal*. 79 (1996): pp. 202-10. (Accessed 10/05/2016), The University of Leicester Digital Library. <http://www2.le.ac.uk/remote>
- Stenner, P. (2018), *Liminality and Experience: A Transdisciplinary Approach to the Psychosocial*, Palgrave Macmillan Limited, London. Available from: ProQuest Ebook Central. (Accessed 26/02/ 2019).
- Stephan, R. (2006), "Arab Women Writing Their Sexuality." *HAWWA*, 4, pp. 159-180, DOI:<https://doi.org/10.1163/156920806779152219>
- Stewart, V. (2003), *Women's Autobiography*. Palgrave: New York.
- Stocks, C. (2007), "Trauma theory and the singular self: rethinking extreme experiences in the light of cross cultural identity." *Textual Practice*, 21:1, pp. 71-92. Routledge. (Accessed 10/05/2016), The University of Leicester Digital Library.
- Swanton, J. (1916). *American Anthropologist*, 18(3), new series, 429-431. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy4.lib.le.ac.uk/stable/660319>
- Talhami, G. (2012), *Historical Dictionary of Women in the Middle East and North Africa*. Scarecrow Press, Lanham, MD. Available from: ProQuest Ebook Central. (Accessed 05/12/2018).
- The Quran: English Translation of the Meanings and Commentary, 1990. Al-Madinah Al-Munawarah: King Fahad Holy Qur'an Printing Complex.

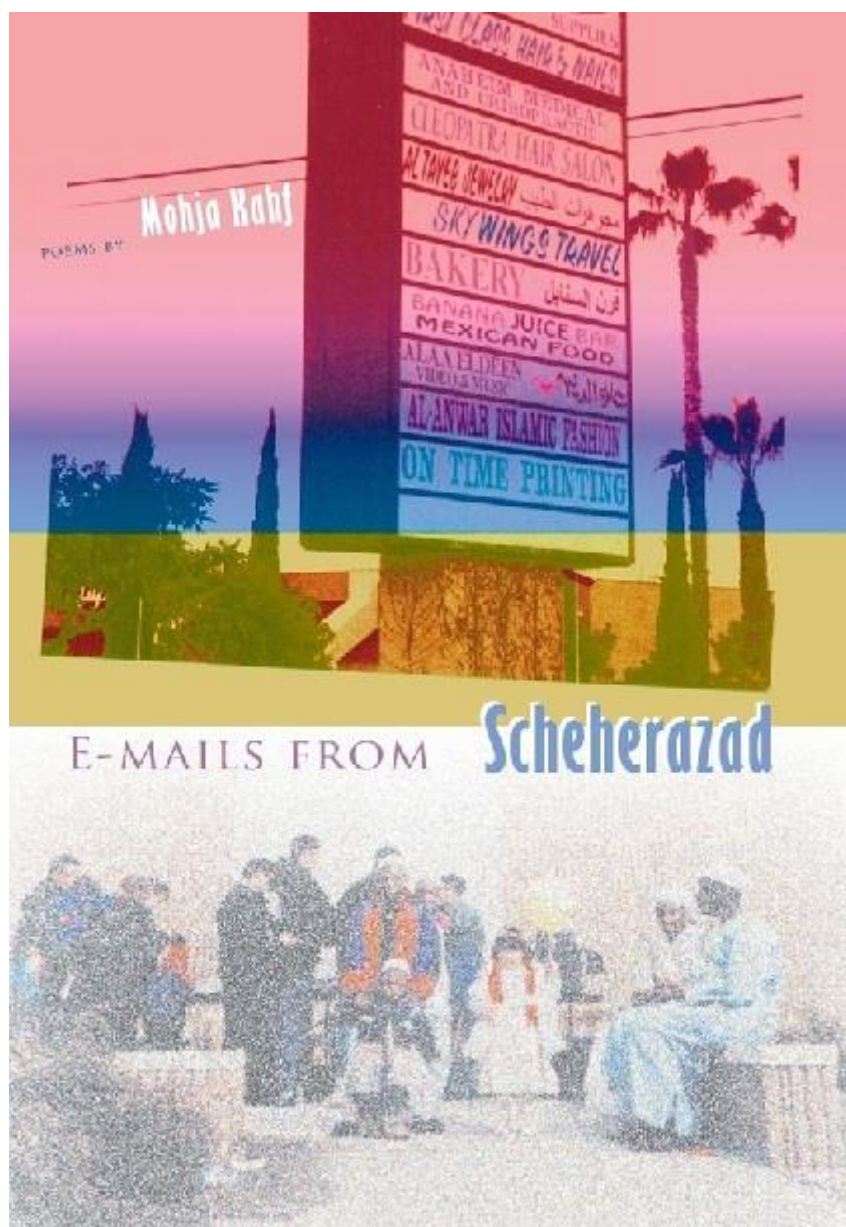
- The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language. Online. [ahdictionary.com](http://ahdictionary.com)
- “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” By Langston Hughes. *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, (2005), Fifth edition. (pp. 1430-31). Edited by Ferguson, M., Salter, M., and Stallworthy, J., W. W. Norton and Company: New York.
- The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (2012), Cushman, Stephen, and Cavanagh, Clare, eds. Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics. [Online], Princeton, NJ, USA: Princeton University Press, 2012. ProQuest ebrary. (Accessed 10/01/2015).
- Thiab, F.H (2003), *Nizar Qabbani: Al Akl wa Alatifa. العقل و العاطفة*. نزار قباني: Amman.
- Thiong'o, N.W. (2004), *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. Nairobi: Sunletho Ltd. [Google Book].
- Thormählen, M. (2014) “Christian Ethics in Wuthering Heights”. *English Studies* 95:6, pp. 637-653. Taylor and Francis Online. (Accessed 08/01/2018).
- Varzi, C.M. (2016), “As Syrians spread across Europe, so does their food”, *Equal Times*. Online. <https://www.equaltimes.org/as-syrians-spread-across-europe-so?lang=en#.WgUywohx2Uk>. (Accessed 11/10/2017).
- Vilarrubias, M.B. (2011), ““In love, she remains whole’: Heterosexual Love in Contemporary Arab American Poetry Written by Women.” *Coolabah*. No .5. Australian Studies Centre, Universitat de Barcelona. pp.62-71
- Vrolijk, A. (2007), “Oreintalism A La Parisienne: DrMardrus, Kess van Dongen and The Thousands and One Nights”. In: A. Vrolijk and J. P. Hogendijk, eds. 2007 *Oye Gentlemen: Arabic Studies on Science and Literary Culture*. Leiden: Brill. pp. 377-390.
- Wald, K.D. (2009), “The diaspora project of Arab American: assessing the magnitude and determinants of politicized ethnic identity,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 32:8, pp. 1304-1324. LU online.

- Wald, K.D. and Williams, B.D. (2006), "The diaspora consciousness of Arab Americans: The intersections of social identity and global politics." Available:  
[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/242441613\\_The\\_Diaspora\\_Consciousness\\_of\\_Arab\\_Americans\\_The\\_Intersection\\_of\\_Social\\_Identity\\_and\\_Global\\_Politics](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/242441613_The_Diaspora_Consciousness_of_Arab_Americans_The_Intersection_of_Social_Identity_and_Global_Politics)
- Wood, Steve (2014) "Nations, national identity and prestige." *National Identities*, Vol. 16, No. 2. pp. 99-115. (Accessed 07/30/2018).
- Welch, M. (2006), *Scapegoats of September 11<sup>th</sup>: Hate Crimes and State Crimes in the War on Terror*. Rutgers U Press: New Brunswick.
- Werenfels, I. (1995), *Managing Instability in Algeria: Elites and Political Change Since. History and Science in the Islamic World*. Routledge: London.
- Wilkinson, P.J. and Coleman, P.G. (2010), "Strong beliefs and coping in old age: a case-based comparison of atheism and religious faith," *Ageing and Society*. Cambridge University Press, 30(2), pp. 337–361. doi: 10.1017/S0144686X09990353.
- Xu, Wenying. (2008), *Eating Identities: Reading Food in Asian American Literature*. Oxford Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Yehudai, N. (2006), "Two Trends of Cultural Activities among Palestinian-American" in Salhi, S. and Netton, R ed. *The Arab Diaspora: Voices of an Anguished Scream*. pp. 108-126. Routledge: London.
- Zeger, S. L. (2007), "Estimating excess deaths in Iraq since the US—British-led invasion". *Significance*, 4: 54-59. doi:10.1111/j.1740-9713.2007.00225.x.
- Zunes, S. (2002), "Why the U.S. Supports Israel", *Institute for Policy Studies*. Online.  
 Available at: [https://ips-dc.org/why\\_the\\_us\\_supports\\_israel/](https://ips-dc.org/why_the_us_supports_israel/). (Accessed 02/26/2019).

## Appendices

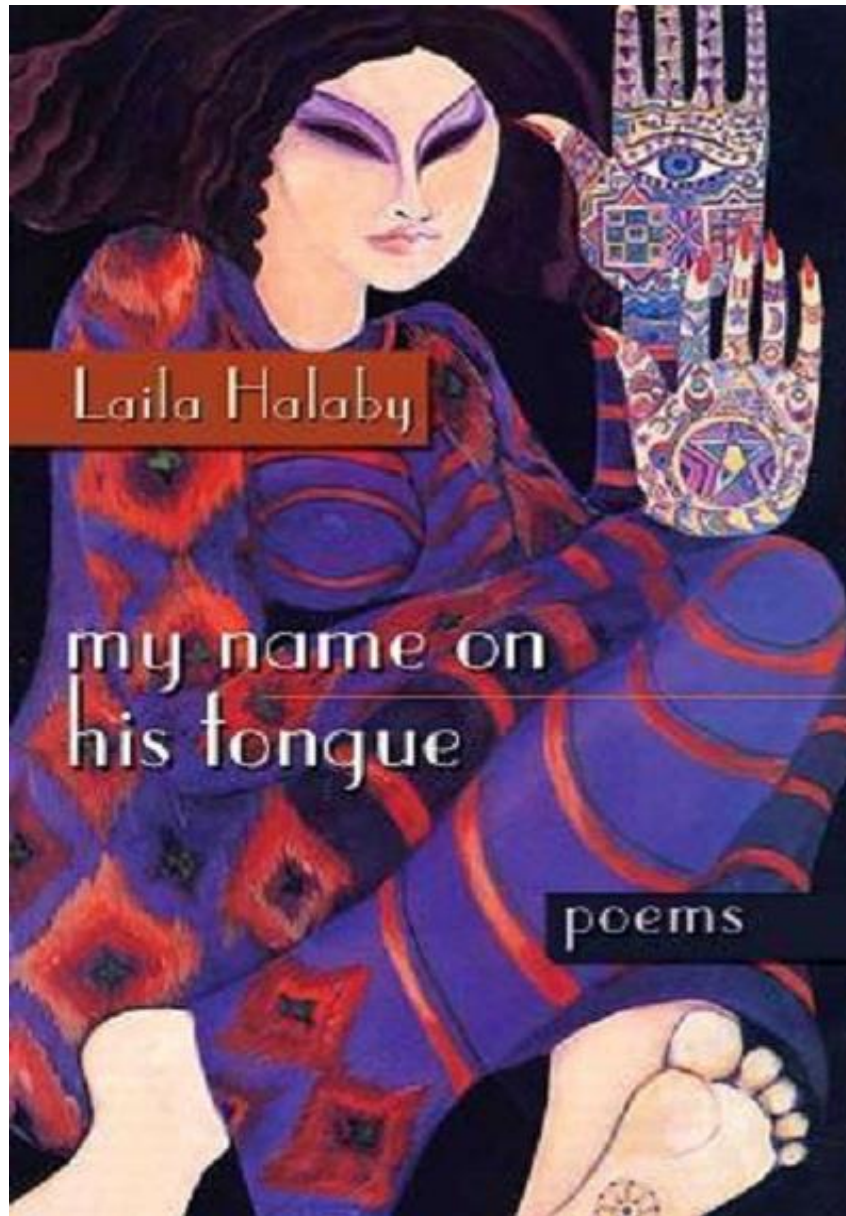
### Appendix 1

Front Cover *E-mails from Scheherazad* (Kahf, 2003)



## Appendix 2

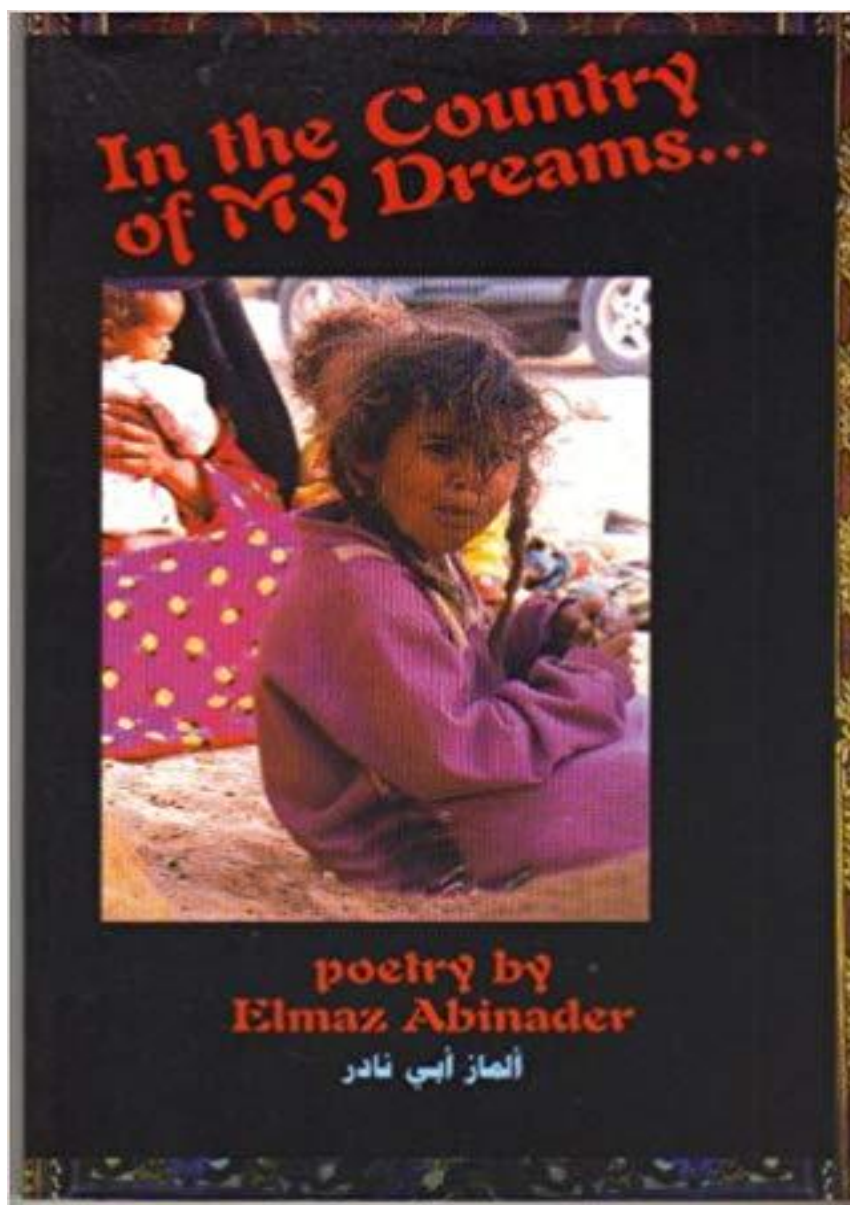
Front Cover *My Name of His Tongue* (Halaby, 2012)





### Appendix 3

Front Cover *In the Country of My Dreams* (Abinader, 1999)



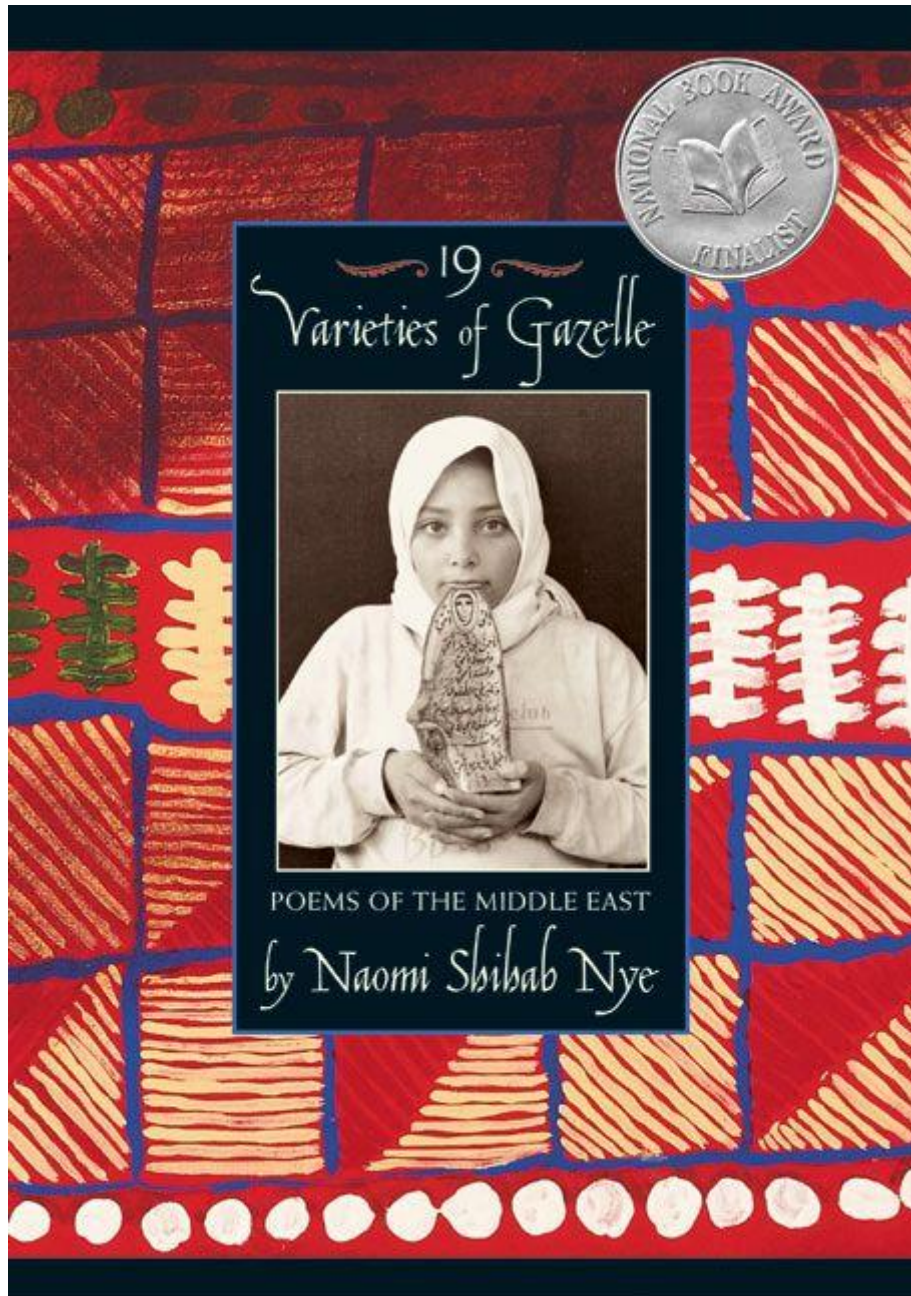
#### Appendix 4

Front Cover *This House My Bones* (Abinader, 2014)



## Appendix 5

Front Cover *19 Varieties of Gazelles* (Nye, 2002)





## Appendix 6

Back Cover *19 Verities of Gazelles* (Nye, 2002)

