

IDENTITY, CULTURE, AND POLITICS IN CONTEMPORARY ARAB AND ARAB-AMERICAN WOMEN'S LITERATURE

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that **Mr. Mansoor Mohammed Abdu Al-Gabali** has worked under my supervision for his Ph.D degree at the Centre for Comparative Literature, University of Hyderabad. His dissertation entitled “**Identity, Culture, and Politics in Contemporary Arab and Arab-American Women’s Literature**” represents his original work and does not constitute part of any material submitted for a degree elsewhere.

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that all information in this dissertation entitled “**Identity, Culture, and Politics in Contemporary Arab and Arab-American Women’s Literature**” is my original work out under the supervision of Professor. Tutun Mukherjee. I also declare that I have obtained and presented all information in this dissertation in accordance with academic rules and ethical conduct and that I have fully cited and referenced all material and results that are not original to this work.

Hyderabad

Name: Mansoor Mohammed Abdu Al-Gabali

Date:

Signature:

DEDICATION

To
My Parents
And
All.....
Whom I Love and Respect

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NOTES ON TRANSLATION AND TRANSCRIPTION

Since some of Arab contemporary writers have anglicized their names, I use the anglicized version of their names in the text as found in standard English publications (for example Nawal El Sadaawi rather than Nawa^l al-Sa[']da^{wi}). I have preserved their transcribed Arabic versions of their names both in the notes and in the bibliography whenever applicable. For the convenience of the general reader, references to the Arabic titles in the body of the text use the titles of the English translations.

ABSTRACT

Spanning four decades, namely from 1967 to 2007, the present study on the topic of Arab peoples and cultures arises from the growing interest on the part of non-Arab critics, scholars, and people to know about the realities of Arab peoples and their cultures, especially in the post-September 11 world that made Arabs and their cultures negatively hyper-visible on the global level. Arab-Americans are one of the main groups in the United States community, who get affected by all the political events since 1967, to less or greater degree, yet they do not receive adequate attention in terms of academic studies or media representation. To explore the thematic aspect of the contemporary Arab and Arab-American women's literatures can serve as a useful introduction to a better understanding of the realities of Arab peoples and cultures. Perhaps a better understanding may lead to a more sympathetic view of the Arab world and may rectify some Western preconceptions about Arab men, women, and culture, particularly the role and status of the women, who have been always stereotyped and used as a site of confrontation in the conflict between the Arab World and West. The purpose of this study is not, therefore, to introduce Westerners or non-Arabs to Arab and Arab-American literatures, but rather to open a series of dialogues about literatures and cultures.

This thesis relies on the historical contexts to provide a critical cultural and social analysis of various representations of issues of identity, culture, and politics as portrayed in the novels of nine contemporary Arab and Arab-American women writers: Nawal El Sadaawi's *Two Women in One* (1968), Ghada Al-Samman's sequel novels *Beirut 75* (1974) and *Beirut Nightmares* (1976), Sahar Khalifeh's sequel novels *Wild Thorns* (1976) and *Sunflower* (1980), Ahlam Mosteghanemi's *Memory in the Flesh* (1985), Elmaz Abinader's *Children of the Roojme: A Family's Journey from Lebanon* (1991), Diana Abu-Jaber's sequel novels *Arabian Jazz* (1993) and *Crescent* (2003), and Rajaa Al-

Sanea's *Banat Al-Riyadh* (2005), translated into English as *Girls of Riyadh* (2007). The study examines how each of these works uniquely tackles various issues prevailing to the cotemporary concerns of the Arab and Arab-American societies. In exploring the themes of these primary texts, this study relies on the contextual factors that informed the Arab and Arab-American women's writings such as location, time, social traditions, political climate, and global politics and events that directly affect every Arab society less or more, particularly the Arab-Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the Gulf wars, the conflicts within and between the Arab counties, the 9/11 attacks, the invasion of Iraq, and the Western (neo)colonial intervention in the region. New cultural changes have been highlighted in addition to their cause and their ramifications relative to religion, politics, social life, economy and education.

Thus, these primary texts are not merely fictional novels about women in the Arab and Arab-American societies but the stories of the concerns and conditions of all Arabs and Arab-Americans, and the relationship between the Arab world and the Western in general and the American in particular. They are not only a criticism of Western (neo)-colonialist policies in distorting the image of Arab men, women, and cultures, but also critiques of the socio-political situation in their Arab respective societies. They expose the disunity, the placement of material self-interest over the interest of the nation, the collaboration against one's own people, the impact of (neo)colonialism on the fragmentation of Arab societies and the role of women in attempting to rejoin the dismembered parts. Arab-American women writers use their writing as a form of resistance; explore what it means to belong to a nation as it wages war on their Arab homelands, supports the elimination of Palestine, racializes Arab men as terrorists, Arab women as veiled, passive, and in need to be saved and secured from their Arab males, and the "Arab culture" as inherently backwards, uncivilized, and patriarchal. These writers

use their novels as a form resistance not only to “Orientalist” and Arab regimes but also as a means to explore and express their feelings about their hyphenated identities, exile, doubleness, and difference. Simply stated, the writers of these novels represent various Arab and Arab-American perspectives and attitudes in dealing with the contemporary concerns and conditions of Arab and Arab-American societies and place themselves in the position of the mediator between the two sides of their identities.

I argue that the multiplicity of perspectives and attitudes of the authors and/or characters in dealing with their subjects, the richness and diversity of their writing, the swift tied shifts and connections between periods of history and different sites of representations stand as an evidence for the strength and awareness of Arab and Arab-American women in creating spaces and springboards for sociopolitical, cultural, and economic transformations. In other words, the stories of the authors and/or characters in these texts are never merely personal; they traverse the domestic sphere to incorporate broader issues that are part of a national and global dialogue. These broader issues include, but are not limited to, social traditions, modernization, gender issues, social class, political corruption of Arab regimes, wars, immigration, exile, the question of Palestine, (neo)colonialism, decolonization, nationalism, ethnicity, stereotyping, racism, national and transnational negotiations, (inter)cultural and cross-cultural negotiations; cultural, political and religious dialogues on the national and global level. The case of women fighting many battles at the same time is certainly difficult, but it is truly difficult for men as well.

Through Arab women’s voices, the study shows how the novels can, explicitly or implicitly, serve to educate the non-Arabs about the realities of Arab peoples and their diverse cultures and especially how Arab and Arab-American women deconstruct the Western negative images of Arab men, women and cultures. In doing so, they also try to

address the Western people to learn about the reality of the Arab-Palestinian-Israeli-American-Western conflict in an endeavor to create a space that can allow the negotiation between the two worlds. In many ways, all the different narrative voices in the Arab and Arab-American texts challenge the Western stereotypical image projected on “Arab woman”, “Arab man”, and “Arab culture.” Moreover, this thesis highlights the solutions introduced by the nine novelists in order to bring transformations into their respective societies. They also emphasize the need to bridge the gaps between the Arab World and West in general and America in particular. It is obvious that their texts show an interest in moving beyond the dichotomies of traditions and modernization, orientalism and colonialism, and patriarchy and feminism. Though Arab-American writers situate themselves within the US ethnic line, they underscore the transcontinental and cross-cultural Arab-American connections to the Arab world.

Throughout the chapters, the scholarly and critical works of Buthaina Shaaban, Elmaz Abinader, Lisa Suhair Majaj, Nawal El Sadaawi, Evelyn Shakir, Susan Muaddi Darraj, Barbara Nimri Aziz are engaged. The study also employs Edward Said’s idea of the Arabic literary production as the “raw material of politics”. Homi K. Bhabha’s concept of the Third Space is utilized whenever applicable. To consider the interpretation and contextualization of the texts, the organization of this thesis into five chapters considers the thematic, geographical, and chronological divides which inform the study. Further research investigations are suggested concerning the role of Arab and Arab-American women’s writings in creating a better understanding of the realities of their societies in terms of politics, cultures and religions, and consequently draw connections between Arab world and non-Arab worlds to highlight the commonalities that human beings share across cultures and emphasize the need to step beyond the fear of the “Other”.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT	v
NOTES ON TRANSLATION AND TRANSCRIPTION	viii
ABSTRACT	ix
TABLE OF CONTENTS	xiii
CHAPTER	
1. INTRODUCTION	1
2. THE QUEST FOR IDENTITY: GENDER, SELF, AND COMMUNITY.....	27
2.1 Intersections: Selfhood, Gender and Nation in Nawal El Sadaawi's <i>Two Women in One</i> (1968)	27
2.1.1 <i>Two Women in One</i> : The Text	32
2.1.2 Self, Family, and Social Traditions	34
2.1.3 <i>Two Women in One</i> in Family Relationship	38
2.1.4 <i>Two Women in One</i> and Social Traditions	41
2.1.5 <i>Two Women in One</i> and National Identity	45
2.1.6 Conclusion	47
2.2 The Burden of Identity: Retrieving History, Generations, Geographies, and Traditions in Elmaz Abinader's <i>Children of the Roojme: A Family's Journey from Lebanon</i> (1991)	49
2.2.1 Arab Identity and the Logic of Irrationality	50
2.2.2. Self, Family, Community and Resistance	52
2.2.3. <i>Children of the Roojme</i> : The Text	54

2.2.4. From Lebanon to the U.S.: Return and Rebirth	57
2.2.5. Immigration: Two Cultures and Ambivalent Identity	60
2.2.6 <i>Children of the Roojme</i> : The Ravages of War	62
2.2.7 <i>Children of the Roojme</i> : The Question of Gender	63
2.2.8 Conclusion	65
2.3 To Be Arab (Hyphen) American: “Home” in Exile and Return in Samia	
Serageldin’s <i>The Cairo House</i> (2000).....	67
2.3.1 Historical, Cultural, and Theoretical Contexts	69
2.3.2 <i>The Cairo House</i> : The Text	72
2.3.3 The Crisis of Identity and the Burden of History	76
2.3.4 Arab (American): Entangled between Two Homes	79
2.3.5 Constructing the Arab (Hyphen) American Identity	82
2.3.6 Conclusion	85
3. HISTORIES AND VOICES OF RESISTENCE: WAR, NATIONALISM,	
AND (NEO)COLONIALISM	94
3.1 Divided Na(rra)tions: Ghada Al-Samman Rewriting Politics, Society, and	
War in <i>Beirut 75</i> and <i>Beirut Nightmares</i> (1967)	94
3.1.1 The Context and Milieu	96
3.1.2 <i>Beirut 75</i> : The Text	97
3.1.3 Many Battles: Gender Inequality, War, and Sexuality.....	100
3.1.4 Exploitation, Violence and Misuse of Power.....	105
3.1.5 Conclusion	109
3.2 The Question of Palestine: Nationalist Ideologies, Colonialist Policies and	

Genderless Struggle(s) in Sahar Khalifeh's <i>Al-Subar</i> [Wild Thorns] and <i>Abbad Ash-Shams</i> [Sunflower] (1980)	112
3.2.1 The Palestinian Women and the National Cause	113
3.2.2 <i>Wild Thorns</i> and <i>Sunflowers</i> : The Texts	114
3.2.3 The Nationalist(s) Vs. the Colonizer	116
3.2.4 Inside Vs. Outside	117
3.2.5 The National Struggles Vs. the Economic Situation	124
3.2.6 The Palestinian: Genderless Struggles	133
3.2.7 Conclusion	134
3.3 Decolonizing the Algerian Mind(s): History, (neo)Colonialism, Nationalism, and Revolutionary Politics in Ahlam Mosteghanemi's <i>Dhakirat</i> <i>Al-Jasad</i> (1993) [Memory in the Flesh]	135
3.3.1 Historical Context	136
3.3.2 Algerian Women and Nationalism	138
3.3.3 <i>Memory in the Flesh</i> : The Text.....	139
3.3.4 Exposing the Ravages of Colonialism	141
3.3.5 Colonialization and the Question of Identity.....	143
3.3.6 Decolonizing the Algerian/Arab Mind(s)	146
3.2.7 Conclusion	155
4. BORDER CROSSINGS: INTER-CULTURAL AND TRANS-NATIONAL DIALOGUES TO BRIDGE GAPS ACROSS WORLDS.....	161
4.1 Emails From a Saudi Woman: Social Traditions, Modernization, and Globalization in Rajaa Al-Sanea's <i>Banat Al-Riyadh</i>	

[Girls of Riyadh] (005)	161
4.1.1 The Historical and Cultural Context	162
4.1.2 <i>Girls of Riyadh</i> : The Text	166
4.1.3 Breaking the Silence: A Critique of the Social Traditions	168
4.1.4 Defiance and Constraints: Saudis at Crossroads	175
4.1.5 Globalization and Saudi Trans-National Identity	178
4.1.6 Escalation and Defusion: The Saudi/Arab-Western Tension	179
4.1.7 Conclusion	182
4.2 Bridging Two Worlds: Cultural Intersections, Ethnic connections, and Trans-National Negotiations in Diana Abu-Jaber's <i>Arabian Jazz</i> (1993) and <i>Crescent</i> (2003)	183
4.2.1 <i>Arabian Jazz</i> and <i>Crescent</i> : The Texts	185
4.2.2 Arab-Americans: Diverse Identities, Cultures and Political Views	188
4.2.3 Common Human Experiences: Racism and Discrimination	191
4.2.4 The Loss of a Homeland: Humanizing the Palestinians and Iraqis	195
4.2.5 Arab-Americans as Mediators between Arab and American Cultures ...	200
4.2.6 Conclusion	203
4.3 Toward East-West Peace: Universal Identity, Cross-Cultural Reconciliation, and Global Dialogues in Naomi Nye's <i>Habibi</i> (1999)	204
4.3.1 Theoretical Background	205
4.3.2 <i>Habibi</i> : The Text	206
4.3.3 Shattering Stereotypes: A Bridge between Arabs and Americans	208
4.3.4 Building Space for Peace: The Palestinian-Israeli conflict	210

4.3.5 New Beginnings: The Arab/American Role and the Two-State	
Solution	214
4.3.6 Global Peace: Communication as a Connective Bridge Across	
Worlds	219
4.3.7 Conclusion	223
5. CONCLUSION	229
BIBLIOGRAPHY	256

Chapter One

Introduction

Politics decides for an Arab (*and for an Arab-American*) not only how he lives, but if he lives . . . Even if an Arab wants to forget politics, he is constantly reminded of it. An Arab today does not have the option of Voltaire's *Candide*, that of cultivating his garden and minding his own business. An Arab is exposed and vulnerable from without and from within. In such context, almost any discourse is articulated and interpreted with political framework.

(Ferial Ghazoul, "The Poetics" 107)

Because the histories we learn in school, the tales we hear in the street, the claims made on our behalf, all somehow miss the point. Or simply get it wrong. We are really not how others write us. At best we are invisible.

(Barbara Nimri Aziz, Forward xii)

In the last few decades the Arab and Arab-American peoples and cultures have been negatively hypervisible on the global level due to the ongoing conflicts in the Arab world and the relationship between the US and the Arab world. The negative portrayal of Arabs and their cultures by Western media repeatedly reaches a climax at every geopolitical and/or historical juncture in the Arab World including, for instance, the Six-Day Arab-Israeli War (1967), the Arab oil embargo (1973), the ongoing Palestinian-Arab-Israeli conflict, the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990), the Gulf crisis (1991), September/11 events (2001), the

Invasion of Iraq in (2003), the ongoing war on ‘terrorism’, to mention a few. The political repercussions triggered by these events and media focus on the Arab world has played an important role in shaping non-Arabs’, particularly Americans’, perception about the Arab world and its cultures. There has been a continuously growing interest on the part of non-Arab critics, scholars and people to know about the realities of Arab and Arab-American people and their cultures through their own voices. This dissertation is in response to these and other political, cultural and academic exigencies: I examine the realities of Arab and Arab-American concerns and conditions, their gains, their losses, their stakes, as well as their cultures from women’s perspectives. As such, researching and exploring the thematic aspects of the contemporary Arab and Arab-American women’s writings can serve as a useful introduction to a better understanding of the realities of Arab peoples and cultures. Perhaps a better understanding may lead to a more sympathetic view of the Arab world and may rectify some Western preconceptions about Arab peoples and cultures, particularly about Arab women, who have been always portrayed as one homogenous oppressed mass frozen in a discourse of victimization. The purpose of this study is not, therefore, to introduce Westerners or non-Arabs to Arab and Arab-American women’s writings, but rather to open a series of dialogues about literatures and cultures.

This thesis is an attempt to address the question of how Arab and Arab-American women’s writings—by depicting major issues relevant to the contemporary Arab and Arab-American life—represent a means of cultural negotiation, and social and political critiques within and without their immediate respective societies. Dialogues and negotiations often begin with a question and there are a set of questions that may be asked about these authors and their writings. The following questions will guide the discussion of each author's work.

What are the major subjects they have addressed and how they tackle such issues? What are the main challenges that Arabs and Arab-Americans encounter? What are the means of resistance they have contrived? What sites of representations have they devised? And what traps of (mis)representations have been set for them? How do they contest and deconstruct the stereotypes subjected upon their peoples and cultures? What are the responsibilities they have assumed towards their societies in particular, and towards other women in general? What are the common concerns that connect them from within and outside their context? What are the means they adopt to negotiate conflicts on the domestic, national, and transnational arenas, especially the relationship between the Arab world and the United States?

The present study offers an exploration of the major themes concerning Arab and Arab-American societies as reflected in the writing of representative contemporary Arab women writers from across the Arab world and the United States. The literary texts that I analyze are written in Arabic and English within seven national contexts: Egypt, Palestine, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Algeria, Saudi Arabia, and the United States. They depict the attitudes and perspectives of Arab and Arab-American women towards issues of identity, politics, and culture within their own respective societies, and the relationship between their societies within the larger Arab context and with the Western world, particularly the American. I argue that although all the primary texts portray issues of identity, politics, and culture, the geopolitical, cultural, and historical differences shape this portrayal. Although Arab and Arab-American women authors have not received much critical attention and are to a large extent unknown to the public, the authors whom I discuss here are the most visible ones in their respective cultural, geographical, and historical contexts.

Elmaz Abinader's *Children of the Roojme: A Family's Journey from Lebanon* (1991), Samia Serageldin's *The Cairo House* (2000), and Diana Abu-Jaber's *Arabian Jazz* (1993) and *Crescent* (2003), are all written in English. From the Arab World, the writers and works I have chosen, to provide a connection with the Arab-American writers, are Nawal El-Sadaawi's *Imra'atan fi Imra'ah* [Two Women in One] (1968), Ghada Al-Samman's *Bayrut 75* [Beirut 75] and *Kawabis Bayrut* [Beirut Nightmares] (1976), Sahar Khalifeh's *Al-Subar* [Wild Thorns] (1976) and *Abbad Ash-Shams* [Sunflower] (1980), Ahlam Mosteghanemi's *Dhakirat Al-Jasad* [Memory in the Flesh] (1985), and Rajaa Al-Sanea's *Banat Al-Riyadh* (2005), translated into English as *Girls of Riyadh* (2007), all written in Arabic. I try to examine how each of these works uniquely tackles diverse issues prevailing to the cotemporary concerns of the Arab and Arab-American societies. The nine primary texts under study depict different Arab and Arab-American societies in different times. I argue that through their emphasis on dialogue and negotiation within the Arab world on the one hand and between the Arab world and the West on the other, through their exploration and depiction of the relationship between Arabs and non-Arabs, Arab and Arab-American women's writings can play an important role in facilitating a dialogue within and across the Arab/American societies and bringing the two worlds together.

In case of Arab women's writing, I choose to discuss novels written in Arabic alone, despite the fact that some interesting novels have been written in French and English. My choice to include only those novels is based upon my interest in the interaction between Arabic novels and Arab society: the writers are a part of their respective Arab contexts, and have preferred to write in Arabic to address Arab audiences and to assert their national identity. The focus on women novelists is because in addition to reflecting the reality and

concerns of contemporary Arab and Arab-American societies in general, it provides a platform for Arab women to correct the misconception in the non-Arabic speaking world about them. It is an attempt to reflect the diversity of Arab women's identities in response to the misconception that makes the term 'Arab woman' evoke images of passive, silent creatures bundled up in black robes and refusing to step into the street.

My choice of writers is motivated by different reasons. First, their writings mark a notable shift in themes, from their predecessors. Their approaches to socio-cultural, economic, and political issues, particularly gender issues, are more open and daring. Their texts show a greater commitment to such issues facing Arab and Arab-American societies today. Being socio-culturally conscious and politically engaged in the current debates and struggles that plague their respective societies, and by extension the contemporary Arab and Arab-American worlds, these women are what we might call "committed" writers of their respective societies. With a keen grasp of and socio-cultural and eco-political dynamics- both at the national and global levels- their narration of identities, the abundance of the issues they discuss and the multiplicity of their perspectives, reflect more clearly the complex and diverse realities of Arabs and Arab-Americans and their cultures. Moreover, these writers articulate and redefine, in unprecedented ways, the most important issues within the political, social, and cultural paradigms.

A comparison of Arab writing from different countries of the Arab World and the United States will show how the representation of issues of identity, politics, and culture differs depending on geographical, cultural, political, and historical context. I focus on contemporary fiction because the 1967 Arab-Israeli war marked a turning point in the history of Arabs and Arab-Americans, in all aspects of their life. Consequently, women's writing has

witnessed a new shift in emphasis and attitudes. As a result of the military disaster and a new interest in the Palestinian issue, women novelists began to place greater stress on national and global politics, as against gender issues which their predecessors were invested in. Instead, they saw both men and women as being oppressed by existing sociopolitical and economic conditions and constantly threatened by hostile foreign forces that wage war on homelands killing men and women, and threatening the very sense of identity of all Arabs through the (neo)colonial 'Middle East' policy. However, the situation seems to favor the integration of women's demands of more rights, reflecting national and transnational concerns in contemporary Arab and Arab-American women's writing.

The 1950s and 1960s were a period in which Arab women's writing gained momentum and women writers emerged in greater numbers. That was a fairly natural progression in that, as individual Arab states won their independence and looked for ways to strengthen themselves nationally, education became much more widely available to girls and women. In *Arab Women Novelists: The Formative Years and Beyond* Joseph Zeidan asserts that in the wave of individualism that tends to follow struggles for national independence, Arab women writers approached their work from individualistic perspectives and produced literature that greatly reflected the aspirations of Arab women who played a crucial role in the struggle against foreign colonization (5). But this hope was short-lived and a new transformation in all the aspects of the history of the Arab World started with the defeat of Arab militaries in the Six-Day Arab-Israeli War in 1967 under the leadership of Nasser of Egypt. This defeat in which Israel occupied more parts of Palestine, Egypt, Lebanon, and Syria marked a sign of the death of Arab nationalism and unity. The *defeat* followed by Nasser's death in 1970s deepened the wounds of the frustrated Arab people, representing the

real death of the Arab nationalism, and opened the gates for (neo)colonialism, the expansion of Israel, the reemergence of powerful Islamic movements, the collusion of some Arab regimes with the (neo)colonizers, and more immigration and exile of Palestinians who became homeless and uprooted from their homeland. This situation touched, and still affects, every aspect of the life of Arabs in all the Arab and Arab-American communities.

Arab immigration to the US is characteristically divided into three phases: the first one extending from 1885 to 1945, the second from 1945 to 1967, and the third from 1967 to the present (Naber 1). The first wave of Arab immigrants consisted mainly of Lebanese Christians who, although invariably classified as Syrians or even Turks, rejected for the most part any Arab national commitments or identifications, maintaining their cultural and social links to their home country while seeking assimilation in the US by claiming their rights to be categorized as white citizens (Saliba, "Resisting Invisibility" 311). The second and third waves of Arab immigrants, however, proved to be less prone to assimilation since they were largely comprised of Muslims and Arabs who maintained strong Arab national identities (Saliba, "Resisting Invisibility" 311-12). The heightened political tension between the US and the Arab world in the second half of the twentieth century, especially following the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, galvanized a "rising ethnopolitical consciousness" among the Arab-American community, while simultaneously instigating, according to Arab-American scholar Nadine Naber, "the beginning of [this community's] social, political and cultural marginalization" (3).

Even though some believe that Arab-American literature is a mere extension of Arabic literature, I firmly lay out the claim throughout this study that Arab-American literature is a specific genre by itself that nevertheless exhibits thematic links and shares

commonalities not only with Arabic literature as such, but also with the US ethnic literatures, particularly with South Asian-American literatures. This relation to Arabic and the US ethnic literatures justifies the engagement of H. K. Bhabha concept of “Third Space” to theorize Arab-American novels under the study wherever applicable. In other words, what unites Arab-American writers is the way in which they claim and embrace their hyphenated identities. It is an allegiance that they tirelessly explore through their writing. Poet and translator Khaled Mattawa, for instance, is with the belief that Arab-American writers should act as “ambassadors of a great and rich [Arab] culture” by stating that “the more urgent task is to take stock of, and assert a claim to, the American context by enriching the dialogue among Arab-Americans' diverse influences” (qtd. in Majaj, “Of Stories” 31).

One can only speculate why most Arab and Arab-American authors, both men and women, have received little or no attention in terms of literary and cultural studies, academic scholarship, or media representation. In *The Arabs in the Mind of America* (1988), Michael Suleiman examines the influence of the media on foreign policy and vice versa. He argues that depiction of the “Other” in the media depends on how the United States views other nations. Nations and regions would be depicted negatively in the press if identified as enemies and positively if identified as friends. He argues further that when the United States emerged as a superpower after WW II it did not see allies in Arab leaders promoting Arab nationalism, but rather enemies, especially when Arab leaders turned to the Soviet Union for support. Consequently, a positive portrayal of Arabs was not in the national interest of the United States. Instead of supporting Arab nationalism, the United States chose to side with local rulers of individual Arab countries. Moreover, the rise of radical Muslim fundamentalism was also regarded as a threat to the Western world. He argues that the first

major conflict was in the 1950s, a time when the United States became the major Western power and the Arab World grew "enormously more important with the discovery of the largest reserves of oil and gas in the world" (3). Also, Harry S. Truman's recognition of the State of Israel was another factor that complicated United States-Arab world relations.

According to Suleiman, many view the Zionist movement and its supporters as responsible for the hostile climate against the Arabs. The negative propaganda directed at the Arabs as a group serves Zionism's aim of founding and defending the State of Israel as well as gaining support from the United States and the West in its conflict and wars with the Palestinians and Arab nations. While Suleiman acknowledges that the United States has been supportive of Israel in its wars against Arab countries, he finds that it is the national interest factor that is more valid and has been the overall basis for U.S. policy. He argues:

[t]he negative image Americans have of Arabs and Muslims makes it easy for anyone hostile to the Arabs to whip up public sentiment against them or against any Arab leader, country, or people. The Zionists certainly exploit this situation; so did American politicians, political aspirants, and American presidents in pursuit of specific policies. (2)

Whether it is the memory of the threat of Islam coupled with the rise of radical fundamentalism, national interests, or the influence of the Zionist movement--or the sum of all of these factors--one can conclude that political issues did contribute to the negative portrayal of Arabs. In *Orientalism*, Edward Said argues further:

One of the striking aspects of the new American social-science attention to the Orient is its singular avoidance of literature. You can read through reams of expert writing on the modern Near East and never encounter a single reference

to literature. What seem to matter far more to the regional expert are "facts," of which a literary text is perhaps a disturber. The net effect of this remarkable omission in modern American awareness of the Arab or Islamic Orient is to keep the region and its people conceptually emasculated, reduced to "attitudes," "trends," statistics: in short, dehumanized. (291)

The question that comes to mind is: can the political situation and the misrepresentation of Arabs also be the reason for the fact that Arab and Arab-American writing has received little critical attention? The political tension is a reality, and, if indeed it is responsible for the neglect of Arab and Arab-American literatures, the study of Arab and Arab-American writings, particularly women's, should be seen as a means of building understanding between these two worlds. More importantly, Arab and Arab-American women have always been used as a site in the political and cultural conflict between the Arab and the Western worlds. Contemporary Arab and Arab-American writers still confront limited gender roles, and identify themselves and their works as being transformative and challenging to the manner in which they are perceived and treated by two groups: a wider Western public that often reduces them to Orientalist stereotypes, and members of their own communities who often quell or disregard their voices. Moreover, the readers outside the Arab World, particularly Western readers, are unaware that Arab women writers exist at all, except for Nawal El Sadaawi who gained popularity in the West due to the English translations of her Arabic works. The works of hers that were translated into English are different from the original Arabic texts in the sense that the translators and editors who reproduced her novels were very selective to highlight the minor issues of veil, Arab men's patriarchy, Arab women's oppression by culture and Islam, female circumcision, and

the backwardness of Arab culture. This makes it more urgent to write about Arab women writers in English than it is in Arabic and through their own voices.

Covering four decades, from 1967 to 2007, this thesis aims to critically analyze novels written by contemporary Arab women from across the Arab World and the US. It also aims to provide a comprehensive critical analysis of the diverse representations used by these writers to better understand and narrate the diverse peoples and cultures, and the reality of the Arab World today from their perspectives. Together, these texts present a nuanced spectrum of challenging experiences that the protagonists undergo as a result of being present in certain conflicted places and at certain hard times; by the same token, they provide a spectrum of possibilities for transcending adversity and creating spaces to construct identities, bridge political gaps, and negotiate traditions and cultures. As such, the questions concerning Arab women, their appearance, status, roles, obligations, responsibilities and aspirations, are dealt with, through their voices.

It is important to note that I avoid explicit reference to question of religion, not because I do not consider this to be significant but because it is my understanding that this issue may come to dominate the discussion on Arab and Arab-American women's writing though it is not found as a major theme in the primary texts considered in this study. Moreover, religion has never been a problem for Arab people, whether Muslims, Christians or Jews. The problems that concern the contemporary Arabs and Arab-Americans are purely socio-cultural, political, and economic. As for women, they have never blamed Islam for their marginalization. On the contrary, they have based their struggle for their rights on Islamic concepts. They are aware that religious institutions are male-dominated and it is only people who misinterpret Quran and Hadith to control women. Therefore, women, in turn,

draw on religion to claim their rights and status while addressing subjects which deal with women's issues. Nawal Al-Saadawi and Rajaa Al-Sanea, for example, have a sound understanding of Islam and they always ground their struggle for women rights on religious concepts quoting from the Quran and Hadith. In the same vein, Arab and Arab-American women use religion as a vehicle to refute the notion of relating the conflicts on the local, national, and global arenas, to religion. Instead they choose to blame politics, as can be seen in Naomi Shihap Nye's *Habibi*. However, this study, in many ways, attempts to balance the need to focus on the social, cultural, economic, political and historical material by placing it in a critical context.

In this study I also avoid rehashing the empowerment narrative (of "Arab women are not oppressed") and focus more on analyzing the complex ways in which Arab women explore various issues that go beyond the oppression/liberation dichotomy. While I acknowledge the value of this discourse, I believe that scholarship about Arab and Arab-American women writers needs to move beyond it. I have specifically chosen texts that explore a wide range of domestic, national and international issues such as identities with its several facets, war, exile, social injustices, political corruption, (neo)colonization and decolonization, inter-ethnic and intercultural negotiations. Therefore, while my primary texts must—and do—explore the subject of Arab and Arab-Americans women's issues in a manner that goes beyond the oppressor/oppressed dichotomy, they also delve into broader socio-cultural, eco-political, and ethnic issues that may or may not be directly related to it. The analysis of the texts also examines how Arab and Arab-American women's texts challenge the stereotypes about Arabs, and facilitates a series of dialogues and negotiations on the local, national, and global level. In other words, my study of the novels written by Arab

women does not imply a feminist study for the fact that the authors choose to situate themselves as citizens and women tackling all the subjects that affect their respective societies as they matter for men and women alike.

Due to the large number of Arab countries¹, Arab and Arab-American women writers, and of huge number of works in all genres of writings, the focus of this thesis is narrowed to novels. To justify my focus in dealing with the genre of the novel to explore the thematic aspect of Arab and Arab-American women's writing, I argue that novels allow the reader to invade every corner of society. The novel addresses important subjects through the experience of the individual within the context of his or her surroundings. The novel addresses the reader who is then able to visualize and internalize the experience of the characters. Because human beings experience reality in a subjective fashion, the narrative is a powerful tool that enters the reader's consciousness and experience of reality from a subjective point of view. Therefore, novels have a great advantage over didactic models of disseminating information. Unlike textbooks that tend to teach by preaching, novels teach the reader by showing. Georg Lukacs, a philosopher and literary critic argued that novels can depict history more fully than "factual reporting" because in novels,

... Historical necessity is no otherworldly fate divorced from man; it is the complex interaction of concrete historical circumstances in their process of transformation, in their interaction with concrete human beings, who have grown up in these circumstances, have been variously influenced by them, and who act in an individual way according to their personal

¹The member states of the Arab League include Egypt, Sudan, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, U.A.E, Oman, Yemen, Libya, Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria, Djibouti, Somalia, Mauritania, Comoros, and Palestine.

passions. (qtd. in Zuckert 687)

Thus, a novel has the capacity to discuss its topic in the context of human experience not in an abstract and detached form. Moreover, it can transcend artificial boundaries that divide people of different backgrounds and civilizations by addressing every aspect of the humanity of the character. This interacts with the humanity of the reader on many levels, thereby magnifying the similarities and diminishing the differences between the reader and the character. A novel can allow an individual from a vastly different cultural background to deeply understand the cultural reality of the characters. Simply stated, novels can bring people closer to one another. Like no other medium, they are able to reveal the fundamental similarities of human experience.

It is true that novelists resemble political thinkers in the way they choose a distinctive medium to study social, ethnic and political phenomena. Edward Said, a Palestinian-American literary theorist, said:

The one place in which there's been some interesting and innovative work done in Arab intellectual life is in literary production generally, that never finds its way into studies of the Middle East. You're dealing with the raw material of Politics ... You can deal with a novelist as a kind of witness to . (Middle East Report 33)

Here, Said hints that Arab intellectual life has been less than innovative except in literary production where it is relatively free from external influences. As such, it is uncontaminated raw material that can be utilized to study politics. In keeping with Said's notion that literary production provides the raw material of politics, I use novels written by nine Arab women writers to explore the realities of the contemporary Arab world, which are

informed and shaped by the political history that determines lives of Arabs and their societies in the Arab world or in the US.

Although the purpose of this study on contemporary Arab and Arab-American women's writing is not to extol women or their texts, it is important to mention that these writers draw on a rich and ancient literary heritage of a venerable ancestor, al-Khansa, whose literary achievements date back to civilizations that flourished in the region before the rise of Islam. According to Yumna al-'Id, the Prophet attested to al-Khansa's literary superiority by dubbing her "the best poet"--notably, not the best female poet ("Lebanon" 13). Therefore, it is not surprising that the first modern novel in Arabic literature as well as in the Arab-American literature were written by a woman. Many Arab critics consider the novel *Zeinab* (1914) by the Egyptian writer Mohammed Hasan Haykal to be the first modern novel written in Arabic literature, but this can only be true if we exclude women writers. Buthayna Shaaban, a Syrian critic, claims that the novel *Husn Alawqab* [Best Results] by the Lebanese novelist Zeinab Fawaz (1860-1914), is the first modern work in Arabic literature; it was published in Cairo by the Indian Press in 1899, preceding *Zeinab* by almost fifteen years (Miaat Am 37). There are actually thirteen other women's novels besides *Husn Alawqab* that appeared before *Zeinab*. In the same vein, though some critics credit Khalil Gibran's *The Broken wings* (1916) as the first Arab-American novel, this study reveals the fact that Afifa Karam (1883-1925), a Lebanese woman, wrote the first novel in Arab-American literature in 1906. It was *Badi'a wa Fouad* [Badi'a and Fouad], published by *Al-Huda*, the most successful Arabic newspaper in America, in which the novelist tackled the relationship between the East and the West. According to Shaaban, most critics considered Tawfiq Al-Hakim's Arabic novel *A Bird From the East*, which was published in the 1930s, as the first

novel to explore this issue in the history of Arabic novel, but *Badia and Fouad* addressed the issue four decades before Tawfiq Al-Hakim's contributions (56). Evelyn Shakir in *Bint Arab* (1997) describes Afifa Karm as “the boldest advocate for women and the best-known journalist of her day . . . she began *The New World for Women* magazine in 1913” (55).

By using Arab and Arab-American women's novels to explore the realities of Arabs and Arab-Americans, this thesis provides a fourfold contribution to the field. First, it provides an example of how novels can be used to study social, cultural, political, economic, and ethnic phenomena and how novelists are political thinkers who raise the consciousness of their respective societies. Second, this thesis demonstrates how the study of the literature of other cultures can provide the reader with the opportunity to make a place in their mind for a foreign "other." More importantly, using novels written by Arab women from across the Arab world and US helps confront the stereotypes of Arab men, women, and culture in the Western media, scholarship and popular culture. On the academic level, this study is a founding stone to fill a gap in the field of scholarship about Arab and Arab American people and cultures from Arab perspectives to meet the increasing interest of non-Arab scholars and critics who are willing to know about the reality of Arab people and their culture, especially in post-9/11 Western world where the image of Arab men, women, and cultures are more distorted than ever. Unlike the media which have the tendency to magnify the differences between cultures, novelists focus on the humanity of the characters, thus diminishing the differences between the reader and the character and providing the reader with light that illuminates otherwise invisible problems.

Considering that the scholarship on the Arab peoples and cultures including the question of women is still meager and in need to be addressed from Arab perspectives, this

study finds relevance. Furthermore, Arab-Americans are one of the main groups in the United States community, who get affected by all these events, to less or greater degree, yet they do not receive adequate attention in terms of academic studies or media representation. The study critically examines how Arab-American women writers use their writing as a form of resistance, how they explore what it means to belong to a nation even as it wages war on their Arab homelands, supports the elimination of Palestine, racializes Arab men as terrorists and Arab women as veiled, passive, erotic, exotically mysterious, oppressed victims in need to be saved and secured from their men, and the "Arab culture" as inherently backward, uncivilized, and patriarchal. These writers use their novels as a form of resistance not only to Orientalist and Arab regimes but also as a means to explore and express their feelings about their hyphenated identities, exile, doubleness, and difference.

The Western media, scholarship, and popular culture portray Arab peoples and cultures for the audiences from across the globe as a "monolithic," and exotic "Other". The novels studied address every single facet of the Arab and Arab-American communities engaged in a process of identification, resistance, and negotiation. Relating these domestic and national issues to the international politics, the texts try to create a space for mutual understanding between the Arab people and Western people by means of giving a realistic representation of the realities of the Arab World with its diverse socio-cultural, political, and economic conditions. In many ways, novels like those of Diana Abu-Jaber, Naomi Shihap Nye, and Rajaa Al-Sanea focus on the commonality of humanity and emphasize the importance of differences and exchange between people of different cultures. The writers emphasize that the relationship should be based on respect, acceptance and humanity, rather than on the superiority and power of one world over the other.

Simply stated, all the authors considered in this study address issues that are central to the present conditions of the Arab and Arab-American communities. Needless to say that in the years up through the early 1970s, those in the Arab world felt close to the West and felt a sense of shared identity with one another as well. Cairo, Beirut, Damascus, Amman, Algeria, and Baghdad, among others, showed ties with western cities and literary salons in those capitals were as well aware of Western writers as they were of writers from the Arab world. Such literary and cultural exchange of knowledge—that the Arab world shared with the West implied integrations rather than contradictions—was based on mutual acceptance, respect, and interests. But somewhere along the way, those conversations ceased. As we are in the turn of the first decade of the new millennium, this analytical study in the Humanities employing various approaches ranging from literature, cultural studies, to social sciences seeks to initiate some long postponed dialogues: political, cultural, and religious; that have gone mute since the cataclysmic aftermath of the 1967 Arab-Israeli War. In today's political world, the voices of Arab and Arab-American writers need to be heard and conversed with. To this end, the current study is one endeavor to fill the chasm in the scholarship of Arab and Arab-American literatures, Arab women's studies, and cultural studies in an attempt to and open a series of dialogues about literatures and cultures, and by extension rebuild the missing links between the Arab world and the west, particularly the American.

The existing scholarship done in different disciplines in English in the West from a non-Arab, non-Arab-American perspectives, shows that the available studies draw from the pitfalls of essentialization by following the orientalist feminist model to study Arab women's writing where the focus is mainly made on the issues of veil, polygamy, female circumcisions, the cultural and Islamic elements of oppression on Arab/Muslim women's

bodies and their struggle to liberate themselves from their Arab “patriarchal” system. The existing scholarship from Western perspective focuses on one writer to generate generalization on Arab and Arab-American people and cultures such as the studies on Nawal El Sadaawi’s works. However, the reviewed literature showed the urgent need for scholarship that represents Arabs and Arab-Americans from their own perspectives. It is important to note that I deliberately excluded to draw on such theoretical approaches that can distort the original message of the Arab and Arab-American women’s texts and subdue them to confirm Western Orientalist stereotypical images of Arab peoples and cultures. I argue that since the Arab “woman” has been used as a site for the production of competing and contradictory ideologies, the representations of the Arab and Arab-American own voices refigure it as a site of identifying, resistance, and negotiation. However, a reader, a critic, or a scholar from a particular culture or social group may be unfamiliar with the assumptions of another group represented in the literary text. Such unfamiliarity does not mean the text is limited to one culture or one type of reader. While a work is composed in the context of its culture and time, the work is not closed to other cultures or time periods.

My study does not impose any specific theory on the writings of these women, rather it let the works lead in the way they represent the realities of the contemporary Arab and Arab-American communities from women’s perspectives. In theorizing the texts under the study, I draw on various approaches of different disciplines according the applicability of such approaches to the contexts of my authors and their concerns. In focusing on the major themes as reflected in the texts under study, the analysis of the texts utilizes thematic and cultural approaches alongside with the geographical, socio-political and historical contexts of the texts. In discussing the novels within each chapter according to the author’s country, an

inductive historical reading approach is followed in an endeavor to read the novels of each period historically, politically, and socially, which required an accurate examination of the text and then relating its significance to the conditions of that period. Bearing in mind that Arab women's literary texts are highly political texts that address urgent political issues, I analyze the texts in the light of internal and external political events that produced the contemporary realities of Arab and Arab-Americans as represented in these women's writing, in their respective societies as well as on the global level. More importantly, the existing scholarship on Arab and Arab-American women's writing shows that nowhere is the question of writing as a cultural negotiation, a call upon a political change, or a critique on the social traditions. This is a lacuna that this thesis seeks to address for the first time by proposing a re-reading of the selected works of representative contemporary Arab and Arab-American women writers through the analysis of writing as part of cultural negotiation, and sociopolitical critique. In doing so, this study goes beyond the paradigm that undergirds the critical literature on writing by Arab and Arab-American women in favor of prevailing Western stereotypes of Arab people and cultures. Besides, my authors and characters don't identify themselves as "feminist". They stress the role of women as citizens addressing the issues as they matter for men and women alike. Thus Arab and Arab-American women's writing goes beyond "feminism" and makes this study more comprehensive including many subjects that are central to the contemporary Arab and Arab-American worlds including but not limited to the question of women.

Throughout my reading of the available critical works and scholarly articles on Arab and Arab-American writings, particularly those published in the two past decades, I came across very interesting critical works and scholarly articles that deal with an array of issues

from the perspective of Arab and Arab-American themselves. Such available critical works by critics and scholars living in the same societies as the authors and addressing the audiences in the Arab and Arab-American contexts are utilized in my analysis. Throughout the chapters, the scholarly and critical works of Buthaina Shaaban, Elmaz Abinader, Lisa Suhair Majaj, Nawal El Sadaawi, Evelyn Shakir, Susan Muaddi Darraj, Barbara Nimri Aziz, Edward Said, Joseph Zeidan, Steven Salita, Amal Amierah, Nawar al Hassan Golley, among many others, are engaged to contextualize the discussion, highlight the issues affecting Arabs in the Arab countries and in the US, and draw the connections between the Arab and Arab-American peoples' conditions and concerns. Inspired by Homi K. Bhabha's notion of the "Third Space" to refer to the multiplicity of identity, and intercultural location, I undertake this study to emphasize the necessity of questioning the representation of Arab peoples and cultures so as to extricate them fully from the lingering effects of a long history of the Western monolithic and essentialist representation that has obliterated their diverse experiences, histories, and cultures. The pervasive representation, political and aesthetic, of Arab women, for instance, has for a long time used what Amal Amireh calls "obsolete paradigms and categories of analysis" (qtd. in Valassopoulos 8) that deny Arab women their diversity as well as their material realities. In line with issues developed in post-colonial discourse, they create pronounced novels which foreground a deep commitment to the complex issues raised in the post/neo-colonial era. Their works question the modes and patterns of domination that operate in their respective societies, and negotiate the various hegemonic and traditional constructions that reinforce them.

The tension between the conflicting demands of text and context arise not only in terms of what issues to discuss, and how to theorize these issues, but also in terms of how to

structure the thesis. The thesis deals with a wide variety of themes of identity, culture, and politics spanning forty years, three continents, and seven different countries. To group writings by authors of different nationalities only under common thematic concerns would make it possible to establish cross-national connections, and to discuss issues. However, such a strategy would blur geographical and historical specificity, and would run the risk of homogenizing Arab culture(s). To avoid this, within each chapter the themes are arranged by the author's country of origin through which greater attention is paid to the historical specificity of each text, and to discuss thematic and historical connections across national boundaries. It is interesting to note that the difficulties in organizing the study into appropriate groupings actually serves to highlight the inadequacies of the categories through which Arab peoples and cultures are usually perceived.

Therefore, to consider the interpretation and contextualization of the texts, the organization of this thesis into five chapters considers the thematic, geographical, and chronological divides which informed the study. Chapter one introduces the study and sets the stage for the discussions of the novels that follows in chapters two, three, and four. The second chapter deals with the works of Nawal El Sadaawi, Elmaz Abinader, and Samia Serageldin in different (trans)national and historical contexts representing a reconnection between the domestic and the national, the East and the West, and the old and the new. These writers show different attitudes and perspectives in looking at the role of family, community, and nation in the formation of identity. Themes of self identity, political history, cultural traditions, gender roles, immigration, home, return, family, community, and nation are dealt with in this chapter. The concerns and conditions of the Arab world from the mid 1970s to the late 1980s are the subject of chapter three. This chapter mainly deals with the Arab

national struggles against Israeli occupation and Western (neo)colonialism focusing on the works of Ghada Al-Samman, Sahar Khalifeh, and Ahlam Mosteghanemi. The authors also virulently attack the diseases of Palestinians, Algerians, Lebanese, respectively, and Arab societies as a whole. They see political corruption, injustices, social inequity, internal conflicts and external interventions as the sources of the Arabs' state of underdevelopment. Some of the addressed issues in this chapter include national identity, cultural traditions, war, gender, nationalism(s), (neo)colonization, exile, inside and outside conflicts, Arab regimes, the Palestinian question, and decolonization. The works discussed in this chapter are located in four national contexts i.e., Algeria, Lebanon, Syria, and Palestine connecting the national to the international and/or the Arab response to the Western hegemony. Chapter Four presents another shift in the themes addressed by Arab and Arab-American women. The works of Rajaa Al-Sanea, Diana Abu-Jaber, and Naomi Shihap Nye reflect a greater commitment to the political, social, and cultural issues moving between the national to the global. The blending of the (trans)national, (inter)ethnic, and (inter/cross)cultural allows them to play the role of direct mediators within and across the borders. These women's writings represent the period from the 1990s to the present dealing with themes such as globalization and traditional cultures, Saudi/Arab women's question, challenges that Arabs and Arab-American (wo)men encounter, deconstructing stereotypes, hyphenated identities, cross-cultural negotiation, inter-ethnic relations, Iraqis in exile, the Palestinian-Arab-Israeli-Western issue, and global-cultural, political, and religious-dialogue. The authors and characters discussed in this chapter choose to inhabit hyphenated identities which permit them to create further negotiations between Arabs and Americans in an endeavor to forge the lacuna between two conflicting worlds i.e., the East and the West at large. Although the

writers share thematic concerns, they exhibit a range of approaches to the problems. The closing chapter summarizes the study, reflects on the aims, issues, and questions raised in the introduction, further discusses the results, generates new themes that emerged with the development of the study, shows the subjects and issues that this study failed to investigate, and suggests some topics that need to be explored in further studies.

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Chapter Two

The Quest for Identity: Gender, Self, and Community

(Nawal El Sadaawi, Elmaz Abinader, Samia Serageldin)

2.1. Intersections: Selfhood, Gender and Nation in Nawal El Sadaawi's *Two Women in One* (1968)

Some of the Leftist groups in Egypt accuse me of being pro-Western, but that is because I criticize their silence about gender when considering class.

Meanwhile, the Right calls me a communist because I link class and patriarchy! And the religious fanatics call me an atheist because I'm critical of religious hypocrisy and because I say we need a real Islam, a real religion-and that's justice. I didn't learn this sense of justice from the West, I learned it from my illiterate grandmother, a peasant who never read the Quran. When I was a girl she told me that God is justice. You don't need the West in order to understand justice.

(Nawal El Sadaawi, qtd. in Hitchcock. "Living the Struggle" 174)

Egypt is a leading country in the Arab World whose government is separate from religion. Laws are enforced by the government, but religious leaders handle punishment for some offences such as opposing the religious doctrines (Rivera 19). However, Egyptians have strong ties with their religion. A small percentage practice Christianity or Druze, but most Egyptians are Muslims who tend to follow the gender-based laws of Islam. While women in Egypt tend to follow strict religious rules and social codes of conduct, they enjoy

more freedom than women of other Arab countries. The difference in city life versus rural life, educational level, and social class determine the degree to which women are constrained.

The traditional role assigned to Egyptian women is to raise their families and do the household chores. Many women work outside of the home in addition to these duties. Men are responsible for supporting the family financially, while women are in charge of all of domestic work of the family. Girls start to help their mothers with the cooking when they are only six or seven years old and become expert by the time they are 15 years old. They fear that if they cannot cook, their husbands may divorce them. Therefore, learning how to cook is a priority (Rivera 21). In recent times, it is becoming more common for men to share household duties. In some cases, families hire someone to do household chores.

In Egypt, it is considered a blessing for a couple to have many children. This is especially true in rural areas where children help adults in the fields. Although polygamy is permitted, a few Egyptians practice it. The practice of having a secret wife is understood as ‘conventional’ marriage in Egypt. This kind of marriage is different because the relatives are not informed of it. In 2000, a law was passed allowing Egyptian women the right to divorce their husbands. The new law also gives women who divorce the right to child support. Even though arranged marriage is common in Egypt, more and more young women are choosing their own husbands.

Generally, Egyptian women wear clothes that cover their entire body except their hands and faces. While many Egyptian women wear the veil, or *hijab*, covering their face, some don't. Educated women or those who hold high position jobs are less likely to wear the *hijab* than less educated women and women in the rural areas. Many Egyptian women in the cities wear western clothes. A Western notion is that the traditional Arab/Muslim dress and

the *hijab* in particular are restrictive. Some Arab/Muslim women wear it with pride either out of their religiosity or to gain respect by wearing it to preserve their cultural traditions. In contemporary times, some Arab women, including liberated and Western-educated, wear it as an expression of political identity, as a matter of confrontation or resistance to Western attack on Arab/Islamic traditions and culture and intervention in the Arab World politics.

Egyptian women have experienced many major political, social, and economic crises which have impacted and defined their roles in contemporary Egypt. In fact, a constant redefinition and reassessment of the status and role of women has been a determining factor in contemporary Egyptian history. Historians agree that most changes took place when Egypt itself was undergoing social, political, and economic crises. As Abdel Kader explains,

The British occupation of 1882 and the consequent 1919 revolution, the 1952 revolution and 1967 defeat, the October War of 1973, and the initiation of the *Infitah* (open-door) economic policies in 1974 have been important periods of transition in the history of the country as well as important landmarks in the history of the Egyptian feminist movement. (8)

In 1919, Egypt rebelled against the British rule. Egyptian women demonstrated in the streets of Cairo alongside the men. It is also in the 1920s that the Egyptian Women's Union was created (Tucker xii). Its goal was to end the discrimination of women in the workforce. Its power and influence increased after Nasser's revolution in 1952. Egyptian women have been able to run for government offices since 1956. That year women were nominated to the National Assembly for the first time. Since then, the government has recommended that a certain percentage of government posts be filled by women.

During the rule of Anwar Sadat, a legislation was passed regarding women's rights in the Egyptian workforce. The law that required 10 percent of the National Assembly seats to be held by women. But in 1984 Egyptian courts abolished that law. Since then, the number of women in the Assembly has dropped from 36 to 5. Many men in Egypt do not approve of women playing major roles in the government. Egypt's constitution gives women equal rights in education, employment, equal pay for equal work, and social security. Egyptian women have been able to vote since 1956. However, just because the law grants women rights, doesn't mean that they can take advantage of these rights. Jobs are often divided by gender. Women hold fewer decision-making positions and high-ranking positions in the government than men. Even in other kinds of work, women are less likely to be in decision-making positions.

In the history of women's movements in Egypt there are two distinct stages. The first stage comprising the final decades of the nineteenth century to 1923, witnessed the gradual emergence of 'feminist' consciousness and early social 'feminism'. The second stage was highly visible and organized activism from 1923 to the present. Margot Badran in *More than a Century of Feminism in Egypt* (2004) lists the leaders associated with these movements as Huda Sharawi, Fatma Ni'mat Rashid, Durriyya Shafiq, Saiza Nabarawi, and Inji Aflatun, and Nawal El Sadaawi (130-31).

Huda Sharawi (1882-1947) was the first Egyptian woman activist and one of the powerful feminists of her time. She offered an extremely positive image of the Arab woman and is still considered the advocate for women's rights. She succeeded in creating better work conditions for women and established schools for girls. She had contacts with feminists all over the world and exerted significant political influence. In 1938 she organized a

conference of Arab women in Cairo that proved to be the first step towards solidarity for the Palestine issue. Over the years Egyptian women have taken their demands to the streets, calling for the release of nationalist leaders and opposing colonialist schemes for dividing the Arab world. In Egypt, as Margot Badran describes in *More than a Century of Feminism in Egypt* (2004), women of middle-class background participated in street demonstrations and the political mobilization of other women in the Egyptian Revolution of 1919. But although women participated actively in various struggles for national liberation, they have not necessarily been rewarded with easy access to political power or greater social sensitivity to women's issues. As Badran points out, initially, activist Egyptian women were barred even from witnessing the opening of the Parliament; the only women allowed through the Parliament door were the wives of ministers and prominent officials (qtd. in Tucker xiii).

Nawal El Sadaawi (b. 1931) whom Fedwa Malti-Douglas refers to as "the most articulate activist for women's causes in the Arab World" (112) represents the second stage of Egyptian women's movements. She augured in a new phenomenon because of her profession as a physician and for her militant writings for women's liberation. She became politically active when she witnessed women's problems. She writes, "I did not have many problems as a physician, but I did as a writer I did not have problems with men outside. But once I opened the door and entered my home I faced problems as a wife" (qtd. in Badran and Cooke 399). Though El Sadaawi's works have global reach, there are relatively few critical works on her in English. But English translations of her novels and nonfiction are available. The scholarly articles and critical books available in English on El Sadaawi's works are based on the English translations of her works, which very often are different from her original Arabic novels and books.

2.1.1 *Two Women in One*: The Text

Two Women in One (1968) is the story of Bahiah Shaheen, a 18-year old medical student and daughter of a middle-class Egyptian public official. In her traditional culture, where women's skirts bind their legs together by narrowing at the knees, she wears pants and cause people to wonder whether she is a woman or a man. The physical aspect that differentiates her from the other female students is that she wears pants, has long and sturdy legs, and walks in a resolute and confident manner. Her world consists of her family, social environment, and medical school, but she yearns for freedom of which neither her mother nor her female classmates seem to be aware. She is outwardly obedient to the wishes of her family but inwardly starved for freedom and affection. As she looks at the women around her she is struck with despair by the falseness she feels about their lives. She also finds the male students in her class rough, coarse and alien. Her father, too, seems to belong to a race apart, and the young woman has long ceased to be surprised at not being her real self in his presence.

In trying to understand herself and give true meaning to her life, Bahiah is confronted with various obstacles: the lack of communication and understanding with her parents, her professor's equivocal attitude towards her, the role society expects her to play, the uneasiness within her environment, and her blurred conception of her goal in life. Her everyday struggle is to try to find a purpose in life, to decipher her desires, and assert herself. One day when she is looking at a painting, and by chance, a fellow student, Saleem, comes up and engages her in conversation. This proves to be the beginning of Bahiah Shaheen's road to self-discovery and search for fulfillment in life. After she meets Saleem, her life starts changing. She experiences love, intimacy, respect for being a woman, and political dedication.

Saleem is engaged in the students' movement and this encourages Bahiah to join the movement. Once the medical students go on strike. Consequently, Bahiah and Saleem are arrested and imprisoned. When her father and uncle pick her up from the prison, Bahiah feels as though escorted by two policemen. It is then that her father decides to get her married. He thinks that university environment corrupt girls and marriage is the best security. He says; "It's my opinion that we should do both: take her out of medical school and marry her off. We already have a groom" (*T.W.O.* 95). Bahiah runs away on her wedding night and wanders in the streets before she is taken to prison where she meets Saleem again. The novel ends with the image of Bahiah's arms trying to reach out to Saleem, but she cannot for her hands in handcuffs are trembling.

Bahiah is in constant search for her inner self, but since she has no idea as to how to achieve self realization, she is unable at the beginning of the novel to turn her life into a fulfilling one. Yet, she does not yield easily to adverse circumstances and is determined to let nothing stand between her and freedom. Because she is ready to meet the challenges after her awakening, Bahiah reinforces her commitment to growth and self-fulfillment, taking new steps in her quest. At the end of the novel, because she refuses to remain only Bahiah Shaheen and live a mundane life, Bahiah feels more fulfilled in being locked up in prison along with Saleem. Her involvement in a student agitation shocks her family and traditional expectations. The decision also changes her life. She notes, "We never know the reality of things: we see only what we are aware of. It is our consciousness that determines the shape of the world around us - its size, motion and meaning" (*T.W.O.* 58). Knowing this reality makes Bahiah understand her surroundings better and helps her to resist the powers of the patriarchal system that exploit both the individual and the social.

The novel revolves around the process of self realization of the protagonist Bahiah. The aspects explored are: Bahiah's relationship within the family; her interaction with her peers; her relation to the social environment; her understanding of sex and love; and finally the struggle for individual identity. The novel ends with the imprisoned protagonist reflecting upon the linkage between the individual and national freedom.

2.1.2 Self, Family, and Social Traditions

As the title of the novel *Two Women in One* suggests, two different personalities dwell within Bahiah. Her surface personality seen by the outside world is that of a quiet and diligent student of medicine whose reputation and conduct are above reproach (36-37). This personality is, however, only a mask for the real Bahiah who rebels against conventional life: "All she knew was that she did not want to be Bahiah Shaheen, nor be her mother's or father's daughter; she did not want to go home or to college, and she did not want to be a doctor. She was not interested in money, nor did she long for a respectable husband, children, a house, a palace or anything like that" (60). Diana Royer observes that Bahiah Shaheen is seen by her family and others as obedient, diligent, conventional outwardly but with an inner self that is strong, inquiring, and nonconformist (51).

Bahiah introspects and realizes that there is a lack in her life, as well as in others; sometimes she appears tough resisting people try to take advantage of her. She is always ready to counteract them. Her dilemma is that since she resembles her mother, she is expected to become like her. Clearly, her mother does not represent the ideal woman image for Bahiah. On the contrary, she resents her mother on the ground that the latter fails to understand and communicate with her (*T.W.O.* 18). As long as her mother embodies

stagnation, constrained sensual roles, and a sense of female inferiority in a patriarchal society, Bahiah seeks to separate herself from her mother. She refuses to be like her mother.

Bahiah feels that she is denied the opportunity to develop her own selfhood and achieve her goals: “None of her life was of her doing or her own choice” (*T.W.O.* 72). She feels that each member of her family takes the liberty to choose for her: “Everyone told her what they wanted. No one asked her what she wanted. In fact, she had never wanted any of the things they wanted for her. She did not want to be a doctor and especially not a chest specialist” (73). She undergoes an identity crisis, which explains the title of the work: the split of Bahiah into two women.

As the story unfolds Bahiah’s goal, her search for the inner self becomes manifest. Sometimes she appears undecided, hindered, and lost: “She was afraid that by a magic touch she would become somebody other than Bahiah Shaheen, somebody who was her real self” (36). She does not know her real self; the only thing she was aware of is that she was not what everybody knew her to be, the hard-working, well-behaved medical student (36). She also knows that she can be a different Bahiah Shaheen, her real self (46-47). This denotes that Bahiah’s probing of her true self involves conflict with how others see her, an awareness of her feelings about their perceptions, and ultimately of her ability to ignore them. She is trying to internalize her dilemmas and experiences a process which is punctuated with fear, feelings of loss and lack of direction, and emptiness, along with the absence of connectedness with anyone except Saleem. Yet, confronting her emptiness and fear can be viewed as part of the unfolding of her growth: “It was a violent consuming desire to experience the peak of danger to its very end, that we might be rid of it for ever” (46). In response to her fear and her ability to overcome it, thus progressing in her attempt to grasp her true self, Bahiah is

quite prepared: “She knew that another will was lying in wait for her, ready to seize the slightest opportunity to destroy her,” (48). However, danger and fear serve as an incentive, a stimulus that means that she has become stronger, desired and feared (57).

The protagonist cannot strike any kind of balance between her mother’s passivity and her father’s overwhelming authority, a balance that would have allowed her to assert the identity she has developed from the beginning and to escape from the grip of social constraints and traditions. Her attempt to understand herself and to reach selfhood creates an oppressively tense and uncomfortable atmosphere. Raised in a milieu in which female identity is measured by the burden of male authority, Bahiah is unsure not only of her inner self but also of her place in society. She is desperately looking for some justification for her existence and a future that her mother, contrary to Bahiah, has found in marriage.

The lack of appreciation Bahiah is suffering from ultimately results in a feeling of dissatisfaction and a lack of “feminine” values since she does not identify with the female sex and since her father wished she were a boy. Since Bahiah’s self as such is not valued by her parents, she eventually expresses her frustrations and becomes a rebel. Indeed, throughout the novel there is hardly a dialogue between Bahiah and her parents or a comprehensive assessment of her surroundings; Everything is seen, sensed, analyzed and dissected through Bahiah’s eyes. When Bahiah contemplates patriarchal rules and believes that she should no longer abide by them, she has no guidelines as to how to behave and feel. As Murdock explains, “When she [the protagonist] no longer wants to perpetuate archaic forms, life becomes exciting-and terrifying,” because change is frightening and fear can be an incentive, a positive step towards a new life (8). It is the beginning of an initiation process when the woman undertakes her descent, which may entail a long period of wandering, grief,

and rage, “of looking for the lost pieces of herself and meeting the dark feminine” (8). As El Sadaawi writes: “Bahiah was drawn by the strength of her desire to know her own destiny and by the intensity of her fear of that knowledge, a fear so great that it helped to drive her there,” (*T.W.O.* 37).

It is precisely the lack of control over her life which provokes Bahiah’s outrage and her bold desertion of the husband thrust upon her: “The father handed over his property to the bridegroom: Bahiah Shaheen passed from the hands of Muhammad Shaheen into the hands of Muhammad Yaseen” (*T.W.O.* 100). In their eyes she is seen as an object, a living thing they can manipulate and have full control over. As El Sadaawi states in *The Hidden Face of Eve*; “Parental authority is shamefully misused when the matter concerns daughters. The Arab family being highly patriarchal, both socially and legally, the authority of the father over his daughters is absolute” (47). However, determined not to be anyone’s property, Bahiah already has a plan in mind: “But neither of the two men yet realized that she was Bahiah Shaheen, and consequently could not be Bahiah Yaseen” (*T.W.O.* 100). On her wedding night Bahiah makes her ‘husband’ believe that she is not a “real” woman in order to create a scandal, “for scandal alone could save her now, could make everyone cast her out,” (102). She steps out into the street, leaving her parents to deal with the scandal. She refuses to abide by social hypocrisy and blind tradition: “The [women] are crushed in the mill of contradiction between lip service to traditional and cultural precepts, and the invasion of their lives by vested political and economic interests whose first and foremost aim is profit at any cost, and in the shortest possible time” (*The Hidden Face* 49).

2.1.3 *Two Women in One* and Family Relationships

In order to grasp Bahiah's urge to achieve her individual identity, we might start with her relation with her family. Bahiah is depicted as a bright young woman who resents her mother's lack of understanding and her father's imperious omnipresence: "He would turn up at home, with his tall, bulky frame, his straight back, and those big strong hands that could slap her down" (15). He is so strict and convinced about his ideas that, at one time, when he discovers one of her drawings he slaps her hand and says: "What do you mean by wasting your time scribbling?" (26), and throws it in the dustbin.

Bahiah denies her biological future as embodied by her mother, but we cannot surmise what her future will be. She is clearly presented as a rebel, along with Saleem, who may represent the best hope of Egyptian society. Bahiah feels that her mother is a living institution rather than a living person, a vehicle of values to be inculcated into her daughter along with the social conventions. The ambivalence and anxiety attached to Bahiah's feelings about her mother stem from the fact that this (unnamed) mother hardly communicates with her, has no identity of her own, and is immensely passive. Probably her mother would have been able to ensure Bahiah's happiness and growth if she herself were fully enjoying life. The implication is that Bahiah's mother has not provided her with an ideal childhood; yet, if Bahiah is already rebellious at eighteen, it is because her parents have not been completely traditional and repressive and because they have allowed her to study and ask questions. However, Bahiah seems to understand the passive situation in which society has placed her mother and, to a certain degree, feels impatience with a woman who allows herself to be limited by traditional roles. This probably is helping Bahiah to elucidate the ongoing conflict inside her between her need for self-fulfillment and the lack of the introjected model of her

mother. What appalls Bahiah is that she is expected to stifle her own needs and aspirations in order to conform to the mold her family and her society have constructed for her.

As soon as she confronts reality, which is the role that each member of her family wanted her to assume and the place that society at large established for her, her frustrations surface and translate into a sour soliloquy, a loathsome and repulsive view of her immediate surrounding: “She felt defeated, and when she saw her house in the distance her heart sank, as though she were a lifer being led to prison, driven by an irresistible force as strong as steel” (58). She felt as if a forceful authority were pulling her to her parents’ home, and when she started pondering on the meaning of this force she thinks that “objects, like people, change not only in form but in meaning too. We never know the reality of things: we see only what we are aware of. It is our consciousness that determines the shape of the world around us-its size, motion and meaning” (58).

The autonomy Bahiah seeks requires self-confidence, individual character, and an independent relationship with the world. Neither her social milieu nor society at large can help in any way or encourage her to blossom as a worthier and better balanced individual. Every time she confronts her parents, Bahiah is convinced that she is no longer their daughter, meaning that she is no longer the polite, obedient, and conventional girl they have given birth to and brought up: “Now she was sure that she did not belong to this family. Blood ties, she felt, were no bond at all, since they were no one’s choice. It was pure chance that she was her mother and father’s daughter; neither she nor they had chosen” (59). She eventually breaks away from their reality since her ideal and her new self negate it. The next step she would have to take would be to announce her rejection of their expectations freely. She is so absorbed in and so convinced by her evolving inner self that “things looked

different to her,” that she could no longer bear the state of things as it used to be. Yet, now and then, the reader feels that the claims of her female role are in conflict with the needs for self-fulfilment and selfhood.

Bahiah’s love for her parents is considered a given, yet she senses the complexity of breaking away from what is, by local contemporary standards, a bourgeois family. Whereas her mother is seen indirectly as responsible for not communing with her, her father is depicted as an omnipresent authority, watching her and controlling her actions. When her father picks her up from prison, he gives Bahiah a sharp, threatening look while he is signing the investigation record. When they get into a taxi: “her father sat on her right, her uncle on her left. The door shut and the taxi moved off. It was as if she had been arrested again, but this time by another kind of police. Her father on one side and her uncle on the other side seemed like policemen,” (94). Being a woman in a conservative society requires her to behave as conservative males want her to and thus confine her to a very limited scope of action: they decide to marry her off in order to avoid any more risks to the family’s honour: “Marriage is the strongest protection for girls’ morals”. Another male family member believed that; “we should take her [Bahiah] out of school. Universities corrupt girls’ morals” (95). As the narrator comments: “He [father] could marry her off or not marry her off, for he was the broker, even though she had never authorized him” (96). This reflects El Sadaawi’s emancipatory strategies in the epigraph she dedicates to her readers: young people, and more precisely here young women, have to fight the traditional assumptions about education and marriage in order to survive.

2.1.4 *Two Women in One* and Social Traditions

As a backdrop for Bahiah's emancipation crisis, El Sadaawi alludes to a society in which women confront limitations and negation, and in the case of Bahiah, this is aggravated because of the nature of the world she lives in. Bahiah's mother leads a life limited within her domestic sphere. Emotionally and economically she depends upon her authoritarian and rigid husband. She is also restricted by her emotional ties to her children and domestic obligations. Although El Sadaawi does not dwell on the limitations of the matrimonial relationship, she nonetheless alludes to their undeniable existence in sketching the conjugal relationship. El Sadaawi explores the emotional destructiveness faced by an intelligent and ambitious girl who sees herself confined, not by her own choices, in a role that denies her an outlet for her talent and her passions. Images of imprisonment and physical obstacles punctuate the narrative, underscoring the personal suffocation and internal anger. Bahiah is seeking a way to "be"; she is rebellious and different, i.e. she is a theoretical "character" who symbolizes the newborn (new to be borne) Egyptian Arab woman. She fights against the internalization of the behaviour and norms of her society, to identify herself and to exert her potential apart from a male, be it a father, an uncle, or a professor.

In the process of searching for her self, Bahiah deploys a valuable quality, that of being self-critical, which can be considered a tool for better investigation: "She could see her defects all too clearly. She hated that polite obedient voice. She was irritated by that placid look which did not see things, but allowed them to be reflected from her, like a watery surface" (37). But she is often at a loss: "She had no clear purpose. She had never known exactly what she wanted from life. All she knew was that she did not want to be Bahiah Shaheen, nor be her mother and father's daughter" (60). Possessing money, a house or

anything material, having a husband and children do not satisfy Bahiah's quest because they are worthless (60). Her strongest wish is to be liberated and light like a free spirit with no constraints and no chains to tie her to earth (83). The second component which helps Bahiah shape her individual character is her interaction with the people who belong to the same generation. From the introductory paragraphs of the novel the protagonist is shown searching to understand herself and comparing herself to the other girls around her. We feel that, in some ways, she is different from them when the author describes her posture: she stands with one foot on the table and the other foot on the floor (7). This stance is quite improper in Egyptian society, and allowed only for boys, a posture unsuitable for a woman (7).

In the Egyptian society, as in any society, there is a difference of characteristic traits and functions between the sexes according to their either subordinate or dominant social position, but Bahiah is well aware of people's superfluous yet cruel interest in outward appearances: they never attempt to know or discover her deeper authentic self, as Saleem points out: "It's impossible to communicate with other people, Bahiah. People don't want a real person," (68). Also, she refuses to yield to any kind of male authority on the ground that she is a woman whose role and behaviour is assigned by others, especially men. Indeed, she refuses to lower her foot when her professor stares at her (8).

Bahiah lives in a society based on the primacy of the male, who can function only with others modelled like him, others who are shadows of himself. But Bahiah defies this system of categorized and codified behaviour and language, especially with her anatomy professor, Dr. Alawi; her father, though she tries to be subtle; and Saleem (the mentally sound), with whom she discovers love. In order to find her own place in this traditional and slow-changing society, she is bound not only to reject the rigid social institutions, but also to

subvert the attitude, the language, and the role she was expected to adopt. Indeed, her overall attitude towards any kind of power would be resistance and rejection of what has been formerly set: because she does not allow any power between her and her freedom (83). She proves it when the cousin to whom she has been married off declares to her that she is his wife now (102). The only person she does not consider a male because he does not represent the traditional social norm is Saleem, because she can see herself in his eyes and assert herself by going to him (97).

The protagonist's concept of life was greatly affected by the realization that the social restrictions and traditional constraints of Egyptian culture paralyze her, impeding choice and growth and denying her an individual identity. Bahiah is caught in a set of historical and social values that oppress her because she is unable to interpret values outside the patriarchal discourse she is living in. When the male members of her family decided to marry her off to her cousin, Bahiah thought that their protection was the real danger: "It was an assault on her reality, the usurpation of her will and of her very existence" (103). Bahiah's amazement and outrage are also aroused when her anatomy professor thinks that she is in love with him because he understands women (111). Obviously all the males she confronts assume her total silence and due allegiance to their thinking, norms, and discourse. Bahiah's voice supersedes throughout the novel, testifying to the power of the cultural code, and the very ideology of male supremacy and patriarchal hierarchy. As a result, Bahiah engages in monologues; consequently she is torn between her affirmation of coherent self and social expectations that are couched in terms of possession, silence, subordination and denial of selfhood. Bahiah's inner confrontation is probably necessary in the sense that, to a certain degree, some clarification of herself is conducive to self-understanding.

It is true that the contrasting connection between the individual and society in *Two Women in One* is not directly shown to the reader for the mere reason that almost everything is viewed from Bahiah's eyes; however, her immediate surroundings may represent a social microcosm. She negates that side of her everyday life probably because she is so absorbed by her inner world that she vents her frustrations and rebels. Bahiah views herself as private, solitary, and self-contained and does not allow her social environment to destroy her. Since human beings are born into groups within a social context from which Bahiah excludes herself, there would be no means for the development of her human self. It is well known that the self flourishes within a community, and a person attains selfhood through the interactions with and the behaviour of those around him or her. If there is a lack of interest in social interaction there is automatically a lack of growth or awareness. If Bahiah aspires to arise and to determine her inner self, she will regard herself as an object interacting with other human beings in order to get to know and find her real self. Bahiah, through a flow of experiences and interactions, would build up meaning and value in her world. She rejects the relations based upon power and domination and strives to assert herself by rebelling against set values.

When Bahiah experiences a love affair with Saleem, her concern is to challenge the taboos which are the weapon the patriarchal system use to exploit ordinary people of the lower and middle classes. To unite sexually with Saleem enables her to tear away "the membrane separating her from life" (75). In this respect, she views herself as being different from the other girls because she could overcome the 'membrane' that veils her mind from understanding the falsehood, hypocrisy, and contradictions of the social traditions. The suppression of the female freedom to fulfil her individual character under the name of

preserving traditions is one way to reinforce the backwardness in the society. In other words, unveiling the minds of women by struggling against all the forms of exploitations lead to the empowerment of women and the development of the country. Thus, Saleem and Bahiah are representing the Egyptian young generation of the early 1970s. El Sadaawi associates the personal with the political and the individual with the national in order to encourage young men and women to reject the negative social traditions that falsify the truth, victimize men and women, and slow the development of the nation.

2.1.5 *Two Women in One* and National Identity

Saleem has been for Bahiah the initiator not only of love but, more importantly, of her political activism in pamphlet distribution, the strike and its aftermath, the demonstration against the corrupted authorities, which has sent her to jail twice. Her love for Saleem makes her discover the larger social and political entity named: her country which she loves (*T.W.O.* 84). Thus the revolutionary fervour and her love for Saleem bring her out of her old self and make of *Two Women in One* a political story: “People of Egypt! Awake! Throw open your windows, open your eyes and see the chains coiled around your necks! Open your minds and see that the sweat of your brows is being plundered” (116). Bahiah then comes of age to realize that the social and political situations of her country need to be changed, and the only way is to fight for them, to make sacrifices, and to mobilize her for that cause. Equally important is her decision to leave home, to look for a job, and to hide from the authorities when her parents marry her off, even though, as Dr. Alawi informs her: “There are eyes everywhere. All the authorities are against you” (110). Bahiah’s attempt to subvert traditional conventions and social institutions enables her to find and assert her self. It seems that

without this radical change, there will be no valid place for a woman's self-definition in the society El Sadaawi depicts. Bahiah challenges and explodes the cultural representations of femininity.

In contemporary Egypt Bahiah Shaheen, like countless women of the 1970s in the Arab world, struggles to fill her inner need for independence. It is the story of their hopes and ambitions, and their quest for emancipation and dignity. It is a telling reminder for all Arab women that hope should never yield to despair, and the future does hold a brighter promise. For El Sadaawi women's autonomy implies women's right to speak as women. El Sadaawi reconsiders the question of who speaks for whom, from what positions, and with what interests. It is clear that in her novel it is a woman's voice who speaks for women, a woman who reveals social injustices and pleads for a better status for women. Over many centuries, philosophers, theorists, psychoanalysts, all men, have spoken of and for women, so that within patriarchal cultures and male-dominated systems women have had few resources they might use in order to speak, desire, and create as women. For this reason, Bahiah confronts the patriarchal knowledge and social practices those confine and define women, and which she is subverting.

In *Two Women in One*, El Sadaawi advocates changes in gender roles which would no longer limit the woman's scope of action in the struggle for accomplishing social, economic and political empowerment "for I am firmly convinced that real harm only comes from an attempt to cover up the truth ... rather than searching for it and making it known" (*The Hidden Face* 3). She also emphasizes the need for changes in the status of women: "It is no longer possible to escape the fact that the underprivileged status of women, their relative backwardness, leads to an essential backwardness in society as a whole" (1). In her novel,

there is a search for spaces in which her protagonist may live, grow, and be herself. El Sadaawi seems to convey that, without a critical awareness of the ways patriarchal structures inform everyday language and life, and without alternative frameworks, women will remain tied to a series of concepts and values which oppress them. Indeed Bahiah has decided to break from her parents' reality and from conventional dictates, since her ideal and her new character reject the negative social traditions they represent. In the end, she turns herself in to authorities symbolizing a political condemnation or rebel against repressive rule. She is linking the search for her individual identity with a collective political identity suggesting that the change in the individual level is strongly connected to the national and indicating that the personal is political. In any case, the way in which people interact and behave politically cannot be seen a completely separated from consideration of personal identity and collective belonging. Elisabeth List finds that the "body politik" has always been viewed in images of selfhood and community ("Selfhood" 31).

2.1.6 Conclusion

El Sadaawi in *Two Women in One* offers a type of narrative that personal as political. The story implies that the status of women is related to politics, "or more precisely it becomes a political cause of the first order intertwined with the never-ending struggle for freedom and truth" (*The Hidden Face* 1). It appears from the discussions that the emancipation of the Arab women should stem from the individual. In order to bring about a better social status, a woman must be able to and allowed to think for herself to help her family and society. In other words, she should acquire self-knowledge to be able to assert herself and enhance the quality of her life. The achievement of the individual identity is to be

included in the struggle against all forms of oppressions, corruptions, and injustices, and in the endeavour to free all exploited classes and groups in the society.

However, in the West where El Sadaawi is very popular with American feminists, her work has been seen as a confirmation of Western suspicion against Islam and Arab society. Critics, including other Arab women writers, insist, perhaps not unfairly, that she emphasizes the plight of women in Arab society so dramatically that she paints an unrealistically pathetic portrait that neglects the advances Arab women have made on their own, and depicts them as helpless creatures to a Western world that already harbors stereotypes about Arab women and extreme preconceptions about patriarchy in the Arab world. Despite these criticisms of her work I contend that what El Sadaawi's writing does illustrate that Arab women can diagnose the societal ills and that struggling for women's right is not a Western import. More interestingly, her critique suggests that Arab women's struggle for individual right is not separate from men's struggle for the better of the society. In other words, the struggles of the new generation of both genders are incorporated and at the same time connected to their political struggle against all forms of corruptions that may confine the development of the nation.

Thus, *Two Women in One* is not merely a fictional story about women's roles in a society but the story of the relationship between an oppressed person or group and the corrupt establishment. The story of Bahiah and Saleem depicts the alliance of a personal kind as well as their political allegiances. In fighting for the cause of women, El Sadaawi is struggling for the development of the homeland because she believes that the personal is necessarily political. This novel can be read as an appeal to the young generation to reject all

the forms of oppressions in the society in order to bring social and political change that contribute to the development of the nation.

2. 2 The Burden of Identity: Retrieving History, Generations, Geographies, and Tradition in Elmaz Abinader's *Children of the Roojme: A Family's Journey from Lebanon* (1991)

The constituency of “the ethnic” occupies quite literally a “pre-post”-erous space where it has to actualize, enfranchise, and empower its own “identity” and coextensively engage in the deconstruction of the very logic of “identity” and its binary and exclusionary politics.

(R. Radhakrishnan, “Ethnic Identity” 199)

Given the heap of misrepresentations and the patronizing tales of Arabs penned by generations of Orientalists, politicians, and reporters, we [Arab-Americans] face a barrier of half truths that we ourselves have imbibed and perhaps believed. So we have a great deal of sorting out to do. We must decide what is really true and what is false, then negotiate those and add to this our own hidden experience.

(Barbara Aziz, *Scheherazade's Legacy*, Foreword xii)

In the last decade of the 20th century, a new generation of Arab-American writers came of age. These were immigrants and the descendants of immigrants who were born in America with hardly any knowledge of Arabic, and connected in varying degrees of

separation to their heritage cultures. In America, these Arab-Americans form another “Other”. During the 1990 census, posters with pictures of Danny Thomas, Edward Said, Jamie Farr, and other Arab-Americans reminded them to check “Other” and sign in as Arab-American on their census forms. In 1991, the Gulf War and the prejudices against Arab-Americans in America sent the Arab-Americans a grave reminder about their antecedence (Abraham n. pag.). Yet, there remains a general absence of Arab-American writers for multicultural readers and of Arab-American women in anthologies of women of colour. Evelyn Shakir attributes the silence of Arab-American literature to the “fact that Arab-Americans as a group have often been viewed with deep suspicion, if not hostility,” and thus many Arab-Americans have chosen to maintain a “low ethnic profile” (“Starting Anew” 24). The persistence of negative stereotyping of Arabs in the United States which coincides with Western (neo)colonialist interests in the Arab world, produces simultaneously among Arab Americans a disinheritance from their Arab past as well as a “strategic essentialism” (Spivak) of ethnic identity, and a reassertion of Arab cultural values. The problem of theorizing about Arab-American literature, then, is inextricable from the ambivalences that surround Arab-American identities, as the ethnic subject seeks to “empower its own ‘identity’ while deconstructing the ‘logic of identity’ (Radhakrishnan 199), a logic that has excluded Arab-Americans both from mainstream and marginalized groups.

2.2.1 Arab Identity and the Logic of Irrationality

The “logic” of Arab identity, particularly that produced by European Orientalists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and by contemporary western journalists and scholars, is critiqued by Edward Said in *Orientalism*. Said defines “Orientalism as a Western

style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (3) as well as a means of strengthening European identity by creating the Arab world as a “negative specular image” of itself. Articles on the Arab mind and character written during the Gulf War reinforced the nineteenth-century Orientalist stereotypes of Arabs as obsessive beings incapable of rational thought. These articles, which passed for political analysis, perpetrated an assumed hierarchical distinction between the West and the Arab East much like that presented in Macdonald’s *The Religious Attitude and Life in Islam* (1909):

The essential difference in the Oriental mind is not credulity as to unseen things, but inability to construct a system as to seen things. . . *Inability* , then, to see life steadily, and see it whole, to understand that a theory of life must cover all facts, and *liability* to be stampeded by a single idea and blinded to everything else--therein, I believe, is the difference between the East and the West.(qtd. in *Orientalism* 277)

This alleged narrowness of vision and inability of Arabs to see life “whole” promoted Western Orientalists’ claims that the West alone possessed the capability to see the Arab world as a whole, in its entirety, and of course, objectively Macdonald’s obviously racist assertion of Western “objectivity” as the universalizing vision has been described by contemporary deconstructionist readings of subjectivity and history which argue for “partial” and “situated knowledges” (Harroway). Yet, arguments of Arabs’ obsessive, irrational thinking resurfaced repeatedly during the Gulf crisis and the events that followed. The persistence of such stereotypes reminds Arab-Americans that while the academy may have theoretically deconstructed universalizing claims of Western so-called “rational thought” and discarded readings of a universalizing subjectivity and history, for the vast majority of the

U.S. public who supported the Gulf War, such views hold fast. Arab-American subjectivity cannot be entirely removed from this context of Western reductionism of the Arabs and the Arab world: it is against this backdrop of racist logic that Arab-American literature emerges to question and correct such assumptions.

2.2.2 Self, Family, Community and Resistance

Arab-American women's writing tries to question Orientalist stereotypes of Arab identities and rewrite traditional concepts of the family to allow for cultural representations of Arab (American) women's subjectivity which embrace the familial and communal sense of the self, the "multitudinous," multiplicitous self, even as it resists the restraints of tradition.

By theorizing Arab-American subjectivities, I will try to show how Arab-American women writers negotiate often complex and contradictory ethnic, gender, and class identities which extend across generations of family as well as across cultural boundaries. Contrary to popular Western stereotypes of sexist Arab men and veiled, oppressed women, this writing is not concerned only with "the dichotomies of gender warfare" (Gagnier 13), but more importantly with the strengths and sufferings of both women and men as they celebrate cultural traditions and attempt to grapple with anti-Arab racism in America, their war-ravaged ancestry, and the effects of imperialist policies on their ancestral lands. The writings of Arab-American women such as Elmaz Abinader's autobiographical novel *Children of Roojme* express subjectivities that break down boundaries between the self and the family, the personal and the political, and move towards a "trans-generational" and international understanding of ethnic subjects within North American culture.

In *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins describes the three levels on which “people experience and resist oppression”; she identifies them as “the level of personal biography; the group or community level of the cultural content created by race, class, and gender; and the systematic level of social institutions” (n. pag.). These levels also mirror the ways ethnic identity may be celebrated within family, community, and social institutions, as well as nationalist movements. Although Arab American women writers traverse the three levels of experience and resistance, individual writers tend to feel more at “home” at specific levels, often depending on their relationship to their homeland and its political struggles. The “generational” power of writing, that act of self invention and self-preservation, constructs a “generational” subjectivity represented not merely by the many generations of family members who symbolize a re-inheritance from fragmented histories, but also by the writer’s “generational” relationship with her ancestral Arab land. That is to say, the literature of Arab-American woman writers is influenced by the community which circumscribes their writing, as well as by the writer’s position within the family or “community” as a first, second, or third generation Arab American. These three modes of “generational” understanding define the subject in relation to self empowerment, family and community, and t ancestral homeland. For example, second generation writers like Elmaz Abinader, Naomi Nye, and Diana Abu-Jaber tend to use their biographies and experiences of their community as modes of resistance while representing and connecting with the homeland. First generation writers like Jabbour and Adnan, in contrast, tend to direct their writings to resist the corrupt political systems which led to their migration. Yet throughout their works, personal biography intertwines with communal concerns to address systematic modes of oppression and resistance.

Arab-Americans had family stories, but hardly any autobiographies or novels to remember themselves by. *Children of the Roojme* was the first memoir about Arab-Americans published in 1991 in America. This was one of the main reasons for selecting this autobiographical novel for analysis in this dissertation. Among the many subjects addressed in the novel are memory, identity, history, culture, immigration, war, hybridity, and gender roles in the Arab world. Patriarchy in the Arab world is not a matter to which most Arab-American writers have attended. The tendency instead has been to focus on strong, wise mothers and grandmothers who are nobody's pawns and who often sum up what is truest and best in their culture. But Abinader addresses women's issues in a realistic way as lived in the Arab World. Even though, the question of identity remains the dominant theme of the novel. In *Children of the Roojme*, Jean recalls his dead father's words upon his return to Lebanon "*Remember who you are, you told me, Father*" (26).

2.2.3 *Children of the Roojme*: The Text

Children of the Roojme (1991) is Abinader's family story, drawing upon 2,000 pages of diaries, journals, and letters written by her father and grandfather and the conversations with her mother and aunt. From this raw material she fashions a world as real as imagination can make. The story bears intimate witness to the hardships of World War I, the disintegrating Ottoman Empire, abandonment of centuries-old villages, and the New World conflict between cultural traditions and demands of assimilation. Joseph Jeha comments that "More than a chronicle of immigration, *Children of the Roojme* also dramatizes the plight of those left behind in Lebanon as they endure famine, war, plagues of locusts, epidemics and family rivalries" (qtd. in "Memoir" no. pag.)

Elmaz Abinader comes from a family of survivors who lived through the mass starvation and pestilence that carried off tens of thousands of Lebanese during World War I (Shakir "Arab-American" 12). *Children of the Roojme* is an account of four generations of Elmaz Abinader's Lebanese-American family. Her grandfather Rachid, sheik of a mountain village of Lebanon, migrated to Brazil, set up a rubber-trading business, then returned to Lebanon, where political infighting and family feuding drove him from his home. Likewise divided between two continents, his son Jean left for the U.S. in 1937 to set up a dry goods business in Pennsylvania, forsaking the native farmland he loved, but returned to Lebanon in 1973. Shifting back and forth in time, the complex, poignant narrative evokes the hope and despair of a people, making one family's saga emblematic of a nation torn apart. The word *roojme* in the title refers to hand-built stone terrace bordered the houses of Rachid and his two brothers.

The novel is divided along gender lines as "Fathers and Sons" and "Mothers and Daughters." Tracing the Abinader family journey through both paternal and maternal lines, the novel describes the historical effects of Ottoman rule, the Spanish Flu, the abandonment of French colonial rule in Lebanon during World War I, the ensuing famine, the flight to America, and death and birth through four generations. The first part concentrates on the dominant male figures in the family, while the second part focuses on the female figures. Of the several female figures the author writes about, Mayme represents a classic example of the suffering and pain that the Abinader family endured around the turn of the century. Mayme's situation is also a case study for immigration. Abinader describes immigration to the West, of the people forced to abandon their home as a result of hunger, starvation, war, plagues, and epidemics. She dramatizes her family's personal experience through their voices and the

stories that have lived generation after generation through memories, letters, diaries and interviews.

In the novel there is a comparison between the western culture and the Lebanese-Arab culture as the immigrants constantly feel the heat of the clash of cultures. The novel also presents some of the unique customs of the Arab World. It discusses the art of drinking coffee and illustrating how coffee grounds are used to foretell one's future. In addition, Abinader shows how family ties were once much stronger and more affectionate than in our current time. Abinader devotes a portion of the novel to discuss the agonies and hardships that World War I imposed on the people of the Arab World in general, and the Lebanese people in particular. She describes the Christian-Moslem relationship around the turn of the century. She also touches on the dynamics of the history and politics of the Middle East in general and Lebanon in particular.

Though the author does not deal with the Lebanese civil wars of the 1970s, she touches on one root of this conflict, that is, the orientation of the Lebanese foreign policy. While Lebanese Muslims opted for an "Arab face" or a common Arab foreign policy, some Lebanese Christians preferred to align themselves with the West. Through the story of Camille, she indicates the way post-independence Lebanon was gradually absorbing Western influence over it. For Abinader, it is the women who see through the contradictions of their existences most clearly. Jean tells Camille of their life in the US, "In many ways we are both citizens and foreigners" (238), and asks, "Do you feel you belong more in one place than the other?" (238). Thus suggests that she feels more at home in America because there "she could walk away from the house and away from the family's eyes" (239). At the end of the

novel, Abinader highlights the issue of identity clash among Lebanese lying at the heart of the Lebanese conflict.

Children of the Roojme covers a range of themes linking the past with the present, spanning four generations and two continents. The discussion of this novel will focus on the themes of identity, history, war, immigration, memory, and culture to show how Elmaz Abinader, as a first-generation Arab-American women, deals with them in the context of the contemporary concerns of the Arab and Arab-American societies.

2.2.4 From Lebanon to the U.S.: Return and Rebirth

Elmaz Abinader's *Children of the Roojme* (1991) operates on the level of personal biography as it recalls the power of storytelling and poetry within Arab tradition.

She summarizes the evolution and the making of *Roojme* by writing:

In no time the discarded stones had reached to the height of the cliff each night they met there to discuss their progress and plan for the days ahead. Soon the *roojme* became the centre of family activity. Over the years of building the harras, the brothers used the *roojme* as their headquarter (5).

The novel's first chapter noted the ways in which Lebanon has stayed unchanged in the thirty-six years of Abinader's father's absence. But later chapters, as Lisa Suhair Majaj observes, document the inevitable gap between memory and present reality—a gap paralleling the distance between Abinader's American life and the Lebanese experience of her father and previous generation ("Arab American" 267). In response to this much celebrated poetic tradition, the novel also echoes the poetry of women. Perhaps in accordance with the homosocial ordering of Arab society which encourages social relations among members of

the same sex, the novel is divided along gender lines in two sections: The first part concentrates on the dominant male figures in the family, while the second part focuses on the female figures.

The novel offers an elegy to past generations, and a promise of continuance of the cultural traditions, by retrieving the lost history of the Lebanese family. As the title suggests, *Abinader*, *Abinader* is concerned with the generational struggle that is represented by the *roojme*, the place of vision and death, an historical homeland for Palestinians, Lebanese and Arabs, and a symbol of hope in Christian religion.

The multiple border crossings across hyphenated spaces, geographies, and generations of family so prevalent in postmodern times chart the experience of ethnic subjects within North American culture. Arab American women's writing recognizes the "translation" of culture necessary in every utterance, even as it asserts multiple Arab identities; and it extends Trinh concept of the "third space," considering themselves as transnational citizens moving here and there, back and forth, and transgressing the binary system. I agree with Trinh that "the movements of transnational subjects—border-crossing and constantly shifting in-between without staying at one point—introduce a new way of living free from the binary system" (Hara "Pre—" n. pag.).

Evelyn Shakir in *Bint Arab* devotes a chapter to "Reconnecting," the Arab Americans' return experience, which she describes as "turning an old garment inside out, exposing the unfaded but long forgotten colours of the past" (96). *Abinader* retrieves and rewrites the erased past to negotiate the present. I argue that Arab-Americans' vision of Arab-American family as the repository of tradition and value affirms the need for historical consciousness. *Abinader's* view is that Arab-Americans need to know who they are and

where they have been in order to understand where they are going-to recall their past in order to determine their future. It appears that they must restore the authority and respect of the family, where traditionally each person has had a special role. I argue that Abinader has opened the doors for Arab-American women writers to create a space and reconnect a site for telling their stories. Just as Abinader retrieves the cultural history of the Lebanese and the Arabs, Diana Abu-Jaber takes a step further in negotiating the two cultures in an attempt to bring the two worlds closer by focusing on the similarities and links between them: between the East and the West, the Arabs and the Americans, the ethnic groups and their “new home”.

The male journey of father and son is one of return-from the rubber plantations of Brazil, from the promise of America from mountain hideaways during the Turkish invasion, to Lebanon with its “limestone roads, terraced hillsides, bleached hotels. . . The hills and the sea, the earth and the sky; nothing interrupts these natural links” (18). Of the several male’s figures, Abinader writes in detail about Jean, who struggled to overcome his childhood memories of the place where he once lived. One of the touching moments illustrated is Jean’s reaction after his return to Lebanon, on discovering his essay titled “the life of a stranger”, still hidden inside his desk. This event drew him to once again think about his life as an immigrant. The novel, though characteristically postmodern in its structure and multiple perspectives, maintains these “natural links” through continuity, moving back and forth in time and between generations that might have coexisted in the hills of Lebanon had time allowed. When Jean returns from Lebanon after a 36 year absence, he addresses his dead father in the orchard: “*This is what it is like to return*” (11) and grieving his best years away from home” (38). For the men, “home” is marked as “place”. The section ends with Jean

getting out of a taxi as a young man in 1935, and the driver says, “Jean, you are home” (140). Jean hears his dead father’s voice, the whistling of a Brazilian flute, he sees his fiancée waving to him in the road as he approaches his family’s house. This “return” becomes a part of the refrain of return that echoes throughout the novel. Memories return, old men return to find changes and sameness as the ambivalent burden and lightness of home.

The novel also presents some of the unique customs of the Arab people. It discusses the art of drinking coffee, how coffee grains are used to foretell future. Abinader writes about it thus: “A line cracks through the middle of the silty design and separates the smear along the edge from the shadow on the bottom. (What does it say?) Rachid examines his cup. (Do you see an end to the war?)” (80). In addition, Abinader shows how family ties of Arabs are much stronger and more affectionate than are in the West. She describes the three brothers who travelled to three different countries and brought back many valuable objects sufficient to open a museum. Abinader compares the success of some Lebanese businesses in the West to that of the Phoenician ancestors. She writes, “Lebanon always surrendered her men to the stories of wealth abroad. Like their ancients, the Phoenicians, they took to the sea, and Rachid, Shebl, and Yousef followed this tradition and the water into a corner of Brazil that Rachid called its earlobe” (80-81).

2.2.5 Immigration: Two Cultures and Ambivalent Identity

According to Lisa Suhair Majaj the narration of Arab-American history in popular and scholarly contexts is informed by the tension between inclusion and exclusion (“Locations” 223). Likewise, Arab-American texts represent both Arab and American cultures, and a process of being created. Arab-American writers write from their double

identity produced by these two cultures (Majaj “The Hyphenated” 3). In *Children of the Roojme*, memory connects the family history. It also underscores the author’s distance from the previous generations and her own future: “I am not a foreigner with adventure to tell, and I am not American” (297). Majaj notices that the question of memory’s function and sufficiency reverberates through Abinader’s writing, (“Arab American” 280). Abinader graphically dramatizes her family’s personal experience by sharing their voices and the stories that have lived generation after generation through memories, letters, diaries and interviews. American views of Arabs draw on the racially inflected “civilized/heathen” schism that historically opposed white American colonists to native peoples, immigrants and enslaved Africans (Majaj “Arab-American” 352). Moreover, she points out that the immigrants perceive Americans to be living within and beneath green hills, slate houses, or around circles of crops. In contrast, Lebanon is terraced with hillsides, rocky mountains, and a vast seaside extending from the south to the north (18).

For Abinader, it is the women that see through the contradictions of their existences most clearly. When Jean tells Camille of their life in the U.S., saying, “In many ways we are both citizens and foreigners” (238), she asks, “Do you feel you belong more in one place than the other?” (238) and suggests that she feels more at home in America. On one hand, the conditions of life in the U.S. proved more liberating for women who now experienced freedom from family ties. On the other, the promise of family stability and freedom from the hardships of war and famine forced Lebanese people to “choose between their husbands and children or their parents and their country” (198). These difficult decisions that plagued their ancestors are resolved by following generations in a sense of personal and familial wholeness

in the “new world.” In the United States, Camille’s sister muses over what makes a house last, as she thinks back on the family house in Lebanon.

“This house will last”, she says of her home in Pennsylvania. Yet what is lasting throughout the generations is not the permanency of place or even stone structures, but that of family. The women’s section ends not with return but with rebirth, as Camille’s son Roji (hope) dies, and another, Jean Jr., named after his father, is born. The permanency of family has replaced the permanency of place as the voices of women join the voices of men, yet the continuity across generations remains a paternal line.

2.2.6 *Children of the Roojme: The Ravages of War*

By describing the hardships that World War I imposed on the people of the Arab World in general, and the Lebanese people in particular, Abinader writes, “Son, I know this is cruel, but the only advice I have now is this: pick the best child of your children and try to save him and let the others go” (35). In another incident, she cites from a diary an additional example of the agony of that time, pointing out: “When I read the letter, my colour changed and I started sweating terribly-not because I feared death. I was facing death every day, but what would happen to my family? I saw them starving to death one by one” (27). Though Abinader does not deal with the Lebanese civil wars of the 1970s, she briefly touches on one root of this conflict and that is the slant of the Lebanese foreign policy. While Lebanese Muslims opted for an “Arab face” or a common Arab foreign policy, some Lebanese Christians preferred to align themselves with the West. The story of Camille, indicates that the post-independence Lebanon was gradually absorbing Western influence:

Camille was pleased, because Beirut was the only place in Lebanon she really liked. When she and her parents entered the harbour two years before, the city hadn't looked anything like she remembered. The coast had filled with apartments and hotels. Restaurants lined the shore, some built out into the water on little piers. Large private boats with tall masts stood-their shadows like the crosses of telephone poles fell across her path as she was pulled from the craft that brought them from the ship. Camille, Shebl, and Mayme waited on the dock and stared into the crowd. Everyone looked so sunny to her. Women with large-brimmed hats and thin dresses pulled old parents toward them. Motorcars waited in the street. She could be in France. (236)

Towards the end of the novel, Abinader highlights a serious issue that led to several wars in Lebanon. This was the issue of identity clash among the Lebanese which lay at the heart of the Lebanese conflict. She writes, "Someone might say Arabi instead of Libnani and Jean would mind very much" (237). She adds, "He [Jean] knew many languages and loved to read in Arabic, especially history. 'I like to understand how governments work. For instance, it's important that we keep Lebanon for the Lebanese. We are not Arabs, you understand'" (239). The question of identity is central to the Lebanese conflict, and eventually explodes into a civil war. Abinader touches on the political dynamics of the Arab world in general and Lebanon in particular.

2.2.7 *Children of the Roojme*: The Question of Gender

For Arab-American men, self-esteem is also a significant issue, but the dynamics are different. To the Arab immigrants and their sons, Arab women are seen within the culture. As mothers or mother- surrogates, the women become the inevitable part of men's earliest

memories, the first faces in their consciousness, the first voices of conscience and authority (Shakir "Mother's Milk" 40, 41). Of the several female figures Abinader writes about, Mayme represents a classic example of the suffering and pain that the family endured. Abinader's biographical account of the "Family's Journey from Lebanon" traces three generations in the past and attempts a reconstruction drawn from written and oral testimonies. Mayme's situation is a good case study about the reasons for immigration at the beginning of the twentieth century when Lebanon was under Ottoman rule. Abinader depicts the immigration to the West of those who were forced to abandon their hometowns as a result of hunger, starvation, war, plagues, and epidemics.

Part Two of Abinader's novel opens with Mayme sitting alone, trying to protect her two daughters from the Spanish flu which devastated their village of Abdelli. Abinader describes Mayme's formidable character and will power. Mayme, who had been barren for 18 years finally bore two daughters. The society placed high value on the birth of sons. Her endurance and commitment to her daughters attests her strength: "Mayme knew how to keep her daughters close to her, to veil them in her skirts" (145). But if her position is one of relative impotence, her daughter Camille, Abinader's mother, reveals what might be considered a feminist consciousness that counters both Western and Arab assumptions about women. Working as a clerk in her family store in the U.S., Camille ponders her position as a woman: "She wasn't quite sure what it meant to be a clerk in Chaucer's time, but she knew that it was not a job for women. All the clerk's she knew were women, and she was the main one at Nader's Dry Goods" (223). On the night of her marriage to Jean back in Lebanon, she refuses to follow the custom of hanging her bloodied wedding sheet out the window, and when the town mutters accusations that she might be an "unclean" bride, she tells her mother,

“I am tired of caring what they think” (241). This indicates that identity is no longer viewed as exclusively dependent on ethnic history but as dependent on the way that history relates to the American present and gives meaning to a blend of Arab, American, and female components of a continuously negotiable conception of oneself.

Abinader investigates the interconnectedness of the past and the present in the making of the Arab American female self and create a space of self-invention for Arab American women where she negotiates a new sense of self in the layers of a buried ethnic and female past. She uses memory and the journey to the past of their female family members and fictional characters respectively, in order to examine the implications of their own ambivalent perceptions of self and to devise a constructive way of dealing with the present. The reconstruction of the past from a female perspective acquires a redemptive function notwithstanding the resulting ambivalence:

You must not forget. . . . How could she explain? . . . Telling [them] war is wicked wasn't enough or accurate. Because I live, crawled in and ate dirt. Because I couldn't breathe for years and years. Because my monthly bleeding stopped when my husband went away. Do not forget. (161-62)

Conclusion

Americans tend to think of Arabs in stereotypical and political terms, especially after the Gulf War. Abinader, a poet and teacher of creative writing, skillfully and movingly brings to life three generations of her Lebanese-American family. She describes how her grandfather struggled to keep his family intact in the simple mountain village outside Beirut where they worked hard to grow crops in good years. World War I, the disintegration of the

Ottoman Empire, and economic decay in Lebanon forced the next generation to set out for the United States. The men worried about feeding the family, while the women worked equally hard to care for children and parents. Hardship and sorrow dominated their lives, but the close family ties and pride generated warmth and love. Abinader intertwines multiple family histories and conveys the distinct strengths of individual family members, creating a sense of history and a sympathetic portrait of Arab-Americans. The connection between four generations of family begins to break down with successive generations, as the father writes to his mother across the Atlantic and Mediterranean, and the poet writes to her father from the isolation of her apartment. Yet over three generations, it is the “generational” act of writing, in both Arabic and English, which holds the family together, translating experience across generations.

In her edited collection entitled *Scheherazade's Legacy: Arab and Arab American Women on Writing*, Susan Muaddi Darraj discusses the diversity within the emerging Arab-American literary voice, stating, “The multitude of styles testify to the variety of ideas, opinions, and experiences within the community of women writers of Arab descent, a fact that tears down the stereotype of Arab women as uniformly similar: silent, acquiescent, unthinking” (Introduction, 3-4). For Abinader, personal biography is necessarily familial and communal; however, her poem “Letters from Home,” dedicated to her father, suggests another outcome for the immigrant family living under the conditions of modern U.S. life:

[. . .] Your own children seem like nomads. They sit in scattered apartments
you can't see your three daughters gazing from their windows. Or your three
sons pacing the old wood of their rooms, yet you write to your mother, they
still pray. (286)

Like Elmaz Abinader, Abu-Jaber, as we will see in the fourth chapter of this thesis, through her imaginative exploration and depiction of the relationship between the Arab world and the West, puts emphasis on the dialogue between the two highlighting the positive aspects of the two worlds. The strategy of using narrative to focus on such sensitive and problematic cultural, ethnic and political issues makes it easier and more insightful to provide deeper understanding of the Arab community and culture, catching the attention of wider Western readership through narratives better than any political talks and dialogues can do. A careful look at the common issues discussed by Arab and Arab-American women writers shows that the Arab and Arab-American women writers have different attitudes and views towards the same subjects. This is an evidence of the richness and diversity of contemporary Arab and Arab-American women's writing.

2.3. To Be Arab (Hyphen) American: “Home” in Exile and Return in Samia

Serageldin's *The Cairo House* (2000)

Growing up, I was constantly aware of bearing the burden of belonging. You couldn't help it, when the mention of your last name invariably provoked a reaction not always easy for a child to read: dread or pity, envy or commiseration. You grow up unable to reconcile family loyalty with the virulent rhetoric from public podiums. You grow up with the myth of the “good old days,” before the revolution, antebellum, before you were born (original italics).

(Samia Serageldin, *The Cairo House* 27)

I have come back [Egypt] to claim what's mine, to find out if it is still mine:
the past and the future. To discover where I belong.

(Samia Serageldin, *The Cairo House* 2)

As a visual signifier, “hyphenation” suggests the connection or division of two or more words. The function of the “hyphen” is to indicate similarities or differences between two words by joining or separating them. Hyphenated identity appropriates the grammatical context and restructures a cultural one. This study explores the hyphenated lives of Arab women in America as they assimilate or separate from American culture and construct and/or deconstruct their identities.

Like in Elmaz Abinader's *The Children of Roojme*, where Jean recalls his dead father's words upon his return to Lebanon “*Remember who you are, you told me, Father*” (26), the quest for identity and place are raised in Samia Serageldin's prologue too, in which the question “Where do I belong?” is posed by the protagonist, Gihan or Gigi¹, implying a sense of confusion related to which part of the hyphen she belongs. The novel opens in the space in-between, i.e., with Gihan-Gigi on a plane flying to her “home.” I agree with Mona Zaki that such moment is “a critical junction in the life of any exile [or immigrant]: returning home” (qtd. in Sharobeem 3). The question of belonging becomes intense as expressed in response to the question about the purpose of her visit to Cairo. The protagonist introspects:

What is the purpose of my visit? ... I have come back to claim what's mine....

To find two children I left behind when I ran away a decade ago: one child is my son and the other the girl I once was. The future and the past. Between

¹ The two names of the protagonist of *The Cairo House* Gihan and Gigi are used interchangeably by the author. Gigi seems to be the Americanized name of the Arabic name Gihan.

them they hold the key to the question I have come to try to resolve: where do I belong? Where is this chameleon's natural habitat? (2)

2.3.1 Historical, Cultural, and Theoretical Contexts

Elmaz Abinader argues that the literature of Arab-Americans and that of other hyphenated authors “make[s] the complexities of identity and place the focal points of their work and persona” (“Al-Mahjar” 5). It is a fact that there have always been debates among Arab-Americans related to which part of their heritage they identify with. Some, according to Lisa Suhair Majaj, believe that the “Arab-American identity is in essence a transplanted Arab identity” supposed to preserve Arab culture and language and awareness of Middle Eastern politics. Another group believes that “it is intrinsically American and should be understood in relation to the American context and American framework of assimilation and multiculturalism” (Majaj, “Hyphenated Author” n. pag.)². The debate among Arab-Americans over how to identify—as Arab, as Middle Eastern, as Asian or North African, expresses the community's internal diversity—religious, national, cultural and ideological. This underscores the inadequacy of rigid categories of identification. It is true that an Arab-American can manage to work both sides but according to Majaj, “there tends to be a discernable orientation towards one or the other side of the hyphen” (“Hyphenated Author” n. pag.). This tension over identification and the attempt to reconcile both sides of the hyphen characterize many Arab-American texts. Arab-Americans, in such sense, are beginning to explore alternative modes of self-representation.

For a better understanding of the novel and relating it to its real Arab context, it is important to provide a background of the writer's family from which this novel draws

² <<http://www.aljadid.com/features/0526majaj.html>>.

inspiration. The novel spans the historical politics of Egypt after Nasser's 1952 revolution till the present. On the domestic scene, Egypt moved hesitantly toward democracy. The New Wafd Party led by Bashas, banned by Sadat later, was allowed to reorganize and compete in parliamentary elections under its flamboyant leader, Fuad Siraj al-Din, a quintessential pre-1952 pasha politician who sat on many corporate boards as a director (Jr. 216). The Serageldin family residence at No. 10 El Basha St in Cairo, which serves as the backdrop and inspiration for the novel is still with the family. The Serageldin residence acquired historical significance with the rise in political prominence of Serageldin Pasha's eldest son Fuad, the author's uncle, who made the house the unofficial headquarters of the Wafd party. Fuad Pasha Serageldin became Secretary-General of the Wafd party and cornered cabinet posts before the 1952 Revolution. Party politics were suspended under Nasser's Socialist single-party regime but was reinstated, with restrictions, by Sadat. Fuad Serageldin revived the New Wafd Party in 1977 as an opposition party, but it was promptly banned by Sadat. It then resumed its activities under Mubarak. The patriarch of the Serageldin family and the last of Egypt's pre-revolutionary pashas, Fuad Pasha died in 2000 at the age of ninety, a few months before the publication of his niece Samia Serageldin's semi-autobiographical novel, *The Cairo House*.

Such political history of Egypt is one of the concerns of Serageldin's as it contributed to her confusion and loss of her real "home". Reflecting on the historical politics that led to the end of Serageldin's family's involvement in Egyptian politics, Samia Serageldin writes:

That Sunday the local and foreign press corps was there in force in the vast hall of the Cairo house. Gigi peered down from the gallery at the cameras and lights set up below, the cables winding around the bases of the thick, rose

marble columns. Having decided against the sweeping staircase at his age, her uncle took the rickety elevator down to the ground floor, catching the assembled journalists by surprise. He took his seat on a gilded bergère that had been set for him in the middle of the hall... There was a hush as the Pasha announced that he had a statement to make after which he would take more questions. He made his short announcement and Gigi translated into English, then French. There was a moment of silence as the words sank in. He had announced the dissolution of the party, in effect calling Sadat's bluff. Rather than relinquish control over his party and allow it, under more malleable leadership, to join the ranks of Sadat's rubber-stamping 'loyal opposition,' he had dissolved it. Somehow, he had mustered the votes to do so within 48 hours." (*The Cairo House* 108)

Focusing on a semi-autobiographical novel, I try to broaden the scope of texts and perspectives handled in this dissertation as a whole. Such a focus also pays special attention to the way in which certain themes, such as cross-cultural displacement, in-betweenness, individual and communal struggle, and critical engagements with notions of "home" and exilic identities, as handled in the novel, are revisited, revised, or remapped in a novel like Serageldin's in new and inventive ways.

2.3.2 *The Cairo House*: The Text

Samia Serageldin's first novel *The Cairo House* (2000) draws heavily on her autobiographical experiences. Published in 2000, it follows the story of Gihan or Gigi, a

young woman who returns to Egypt in the mid-nineties after a long absence, and her attempts to reconnect with her past and with the young son she left behind. It captures the political developments in Egypt over the past three and half decades, including the rise of Islamism and Sadat's assassination. In the journey of quest for her identity, the novel is divided into three parts. The first one is entitled "Photographs," the second "Exile," and the third, "Return." It is important to note that "Return" refers to the writer's journey to the U.S. and not to the one to Egypt.

The setting of the novel is Cairo and the U.S. In the first part Gigi focuses on two photographs that depict the history of her family and her childhood and the years she lived in Egypt with her extended family. This also documents the contemporary political climate of Egypt.

In the first part of the novel, Gigi or Gihan leaves the airport to her Cairo House. Throwing on her life experience in Egypt, Gigi gives particular attention to two photographs that represent influential people and events. Gigi goes on remembering the history of her family. She describes what happened to her family's properties, jewellery and money in 1961 under the rule of Nasser while celebrating the anniversary of the 1952 Revolution. Nasser in his speech on that day marked a turning point in her family's life by describing them as "the enemies of the people" (20) and consequently her family's property was sequestrated. This situation led to the prevention of her family members from their government positions and sending some of them to prisons. The protagonist's father ended with the job of an "invalid" (74). Such difficulties affect the family members' lives badly in all aspects of their lives.

Though Gigi was still a child, she could feel the consequences of such change in the history of her family. She could realize from the way she was treated at school that something bad had happened to her family's reputation and even she noticed the whispers around her as the daughter of "the enemies of the people." At her school, the teacher while explaining the new mandatory subject "Arab Socialism," used to speak of the enemies of the people, the landowners or capitalists and look at her and her distant cousin. She goes explaining how they became exiled at home and how difficult their life was that even friends were afraid to visit them at home:

Few people who had anything to lose risked association with the families that Masser has designated as "enemies of the people." It was no secret that the intelligence agent at the door took note of every visitor, that the telephone was tapped and the servants were spies. Even in the privacy of our own bedrooms, between parent and child, we still whispered. That Nasser's personal physician would risk calling on my father was unthinkable. (42)

Through a second group of colour photos implying another stage in Gigi's life, Gigi appears at the age of nineteen. At that stage of her life, she recalls herself as exceptionally sheltered and naive due to many things among them is her suffering from a strong feeling of insecurity. She speaks of the police state created by Nasser, or El-Raiis, as she calls him, with thousands of ears and eyes lurking at every corner (44). Her sleep was light and was always tense at dawn, the time when her father was taken to the internment camp. With bitterness she describes the terrible consequences of his rule:

Nasser's sequestration decree went far beyond the confiscation of wealth or the stripping of civil liberties. It was the sharply-honed instrument of his

malice: it emasculated, it isolated, it muzzled, it humiliated, it stigmatized; it forced retirement on men in their prime; it immured them in their homes.

Even the women in the family were under constant surveillance and went on whispering, long after Nasser's death, out of habit (44, 46).

This background had its effect on Gigi who "learned to be unquestioning and accepting" although she "cultivated a bubbly surface" (44). At the early stage of her life, Gigi was only waiting for something to happen; and it did with the proposal of marriage she received from Yussef, a young man who was studying for a doctorate degree in London. Accepting or refusing this proposal was the first real decision she had to make in life. But even then, she accepted that marriage because she was expected to, an attitude that was commented on by her cousin who told her: "You always did what you were expected to do" (177).

Gigi married twice, her first marriage, an arranged one ended with the death of her father. After her family lost power and their property was sequestered, Gigi left Egypt and her son behind; the latter being one of the reasons for Gigi's return to Egypt. Gigi's second wedding represented a new stage of loneliness in her life. It was on two levels; on the one hand, she was away from home and her family, living in a cold strange city, London, for the first time in her life. On the other hand, she was psychologically lonely; for her marriage, right from the beginning, did not work out. She also lived with him in different places: London, Cairo, and Jedda, which gave her no real feelings of settlement. Gigi also recalls herself as a mother and reveals, through the image of the kaleidoscope, that having Tarek, her only child, was a turning point that remarked a change in her life:

If you examined the turning points in a life, could you pinpoint the exact twists of the kaleidoscope that set the pattern? If you could go back in time and change course, would you? Or would there be some part of the past that you would be unwilling to give up for a second chance? A child, it has been said, is your hostage to fortune: henceforth your choices are never free. (72)

Going back to Egypt, she lived with her child in the house of her father whose death finalized her marriage. It was a painful experience and the scene of his death, the strongest in the novel, is described in powerful emotions without being overtly melodramatic. She finally decides on the divorce and acts as an agent for the first time in her life. She uses once more the image of the kaleidoscope:

Sometimes it takes almost an imperceptible shift in the kaleidoscope for the pattern to come into focus. Sometimes all it takes is the removal of one sliver of colored shapes for the entire image to change. It seemed that in her life, endings and beginnings were marked not with a bang, but with a whimper. But this time, at least, she had not merely floated along like a leaf downstream. This time she had taken a decision. (97)

The author reflects on both the protagonist's social and political experiences as she moves from Egypt to England, and the U.S. on the one hand and her return to Egypt and leaving to U.S. again on the other. Through her contemplations on the social and political climate at each stage of Gigi's life, she explores the issue of identity. Brought up during the Revolution in Egypt, Samia Serageldin reveals her perspectives on post-colonial Egypt and Arab nationalism. Since her views stem largely from her family's opposition to Nasser³, her

³ Nasser had led the Egyptian revolution and became the President when Egypt achieved the independence in 1952. This revolution deprived Pashas, the author's family, from power as Nasser called them the 'enemies of

attitude, if brave, is highly controversial. As her journey moves out of Egypt, she skillfully captures her personal understanding of issues such as Islamic rituals, gender roles, racial prejudices, economic situation, and political events.

Thus, *The Cairo House* depicts the world of contemporary Cairo in terms of political history of contemporary Egypt, social classes, religious practices, and gender roles. The life depiction of Cairo and the life depiction of U.S. reveal the exilic experiences in both sides and their relationship to “home.” The novel is a compelling representation of a hyphenated identity trying to come to terms with two cultures, time periods and ways of life. My main concern in analyzing Serageldin’s text in terms of the cultural construction of the author’s identity as Arab woman positioned into a situation of physical and psychical displacement in America and in Egypt is to examine how this work tackles the idea of having a hyphenated Arab-American identity and living in-between.

2.3.2 The Crisis of Identity and the Burden of History

Gigi, the protagonist, grew up in an aristocratic and large family in Cairo. The men were involved in politics and business, and the women visited each other, gossiped, shopped, arranged marriages and attended to other family matters. The house was always open to visitors, political associates and family: the traditional Egyptian hospitality mixed easily with a cosmopolitan culture. It was an opulent world that seemed unchangeable. But the Pashas’ time was ending. Many were forced into exile, and those who remained encountered an uneasy mix of new expectations and old traditions. Gigi, a modern woman from a patrician

the people’ and confiscated their properties including ‘the Cairo house’. Such act forced many Pashas to exile including, the author, Samia Serageldin.

background, faced the conflicts between a traditional marriage and the loss of a family; between exile and the need to create a new life while striving to stay in touch with her roots.

For the protagonist, Gihan, “home,” with all its contradictory components (Egypt vs. the US, community vs. individuality, social pressure vs. loneliness, her son vs. herself), is so ingrained in her conflicted identity that she has to constantly shift locations and perspectives in order to avoid the dulling effect that a consistency and monotony in surroundings might have on her analytical endeavours. Her avoidance of a single and secure definition of home ultimately leads her to a better understanding of her hyphenated identity, and consequently to a fuller understanding of herself within/without each of these homes. Serageldin commenting on the novel, she admits that:

While I was writing the book [*The Cairo House*], I thought the title was something I could decide on later. But in effect I realized that I would only know what the book was about when I knew what the title was. And the title is *The Cairo House* because the novel, for me, is not just about Gihan, nor even just about her family clan, but about an entire era in Egyptian twentieth century history that witnessed the rise, and fall, of the nationalist movement, party politics, and the Egyptian landowning bourgeoisie. The history and fate of the house reflect this pivotal era that spanned a century and came to an end with the passing away of the last Pasha at the turn of the 21st century. (n. pag.)

These lines reveal Serageldin nostalgic feelings for the glorious past of her family and the many changes that took place in contemporary Egypt. This nostalgia is partly due to her feeling that this home is not any more the house that formed her full identity of childhood

and the changes and development may erase this historical past and make just one part of the imagined hyphen. Re-visiting this part of her identity, Serageldin writes:

I made my way down the sweeping staircase, sliding my hand along the cold marble banister until it rested on the head of the griffon at the bottom. I sneaked a quick photo of the shadowy hall, knowing the flash would be completely inadequate to light its expanse. I would have liked to turn on the lights in the monstrous crystal chandeliers, to photograph the marble staircase, to unlock the double doors to the salon on one end of the hall and the dining room on the other. I wanted to commit to memory this house that I might never see again. It was the last private home in this row of houses that had once belonged to friends and relatives and had now been turned into embassies, one after the other. One day soon I would only be able to drive past The Cairo House, and it would be flying a foreign flag. (*The Cairo House* 171)

It is obvious that Gigi's crisis of identity is of many facets. Since her childhood she was alienated from her own culture being educated in French medium schools and was exposed more to French people than to her Egyptian people. The language spoken at home was mostly French with her French nanny, Helene. Gigi knew nothing about the other classes of the society living a luxurious life and brought up in an environment different from that of the rest of the Egyptians. Gigi is unaware of one sect of her society, that of the peasants. She simply describes their attitudes and characters when she comments on their reaction to the 1952 Revolution saying: "the fellahin accepted the momentous change with their usual mixture of resignation and indifference . . ." (40). Gigi was not only aloof from certain

classes in her society, but was also weak in Arabic and sometimes could not even understand the meaning of some common Egyptian idioms such as the one used by the cook who told her mother that “he owed them the flesh on his shoulders;” which means he owes them his livelihood (21). Nevertheless, Gigi constantly attempts to show how her family members were deeply rooted in the Egyptian soil. She mentions that the culture she was brought up in was a “hybrid culture” where “Western norms were [in some instances] unhesitatingly sacrificed on the altar of tradition” (11). She also remarks that the cuisine and etiquette at their house “may have been more or less cosmopolitan, but the spirit of hospitality was as uncompromisingly Egyptian as that of the country people with whom we shared our roots” (25). These are some of the reasons behind the cultural gap that she senses and her crisis of identity. This makes it clear that such factor, in addition to the political and social oppression and alienation in her own country, are the reasons behind her identity crisis. But these reasons were not responsible for leaving her homeland which was due to the political and social conditions of the country during the sixties and the turbulent upheavals that turned her family’s life upside down. This is clear in the repeated use of “the good old days,” or “before the revolution.”

2.3.4 Arab (American): Entangled between Two Homes

The Cairo House opens at Cairo airport, a multicultural place with people from different countries and cultures. This text can be read as an Egyptian negotiation of Arab (American) identity in the U.S., in the context of contemporary Egyptian history and Western perception of Arabs, Islam, and Arab world politics. In *The Cairo House*, Serageldin

explores the quest for roots of her protagonist, Gihan, who is not quite at home: neither the Arab nor in the American milieu.

The protagonist is affiliated to both cultures, yet has fears of both and this sense makes her prefer to live somewhere in-between that she can live both at the same time, which means none. Gigi attributes the reason of coming back home to: “Even to herself she had become something of a stranger; her native language no longer came naturally to her tongue; the memories of her old life seemed to have taken place in another dimension” (139). One of the reasons for Gigi’s desire to return home was her hope to find a sense of peoplehood that was missing in New Hampshire as a result of the absence of an Egyptian or Arab community and the sense of loneliness that she experiences in the new “home.” Returning home later, when Gigi talks to the porter, she needs to rummage in her head for correct replies (165). Thus, Gigi lives into different “homes” in which her identity is in a state of ambivalence with divided self and loyalties. She has the sense of home and exile in both parts of the hyphen and consequently prefers to experience a sense of dislocation and live on the hyphen.

In the beginning of her novel she stated that she has come back to claim what is hers. Towards the end of the novel, Gigi affirms that desire with confidence as if she became very confident of her belonging to her old home as she writes: “How can I give up what I have been looking for, waiting for, for so long? How can I leave, now that I feel I have come borne?” (202). However, Tamer, her second cousin, warns her and gives her a lesson: “You think you can come home and weave yourself back into the fabric of everybody’s life, then rip it out again when you leave” (206). Being in Egypt again allows her a space to criticize both old and new homes and make comparison between the two. She criticizes the racism of her new home and the corruption of her old home. Thinking about her new home, she states:

“I cannot decide which I wish to disassociate myself from urgently: Toussaint’s obnoxious sense of superiority, or the grinning vendors’ lack of self-restraint that fuels it” (200).

Evaluating her old home, She criticizes “the terrifying cacophonous chaos of Cairo traffic” regarding it “a microcosm of the Egyptian society” where rules are only observed when enforced by the strong presence of the authorities (152). She realizes what a “nightmare” it is when a child is hit by a car, even if it is his mother’s fault. For the frustration and anger of “the have-nots” will immediately turn “the mild mannered crowd . . . into a mob” (153). She discusses the phenomenon of the veil and wonders how her aunt, who belonged to the first generation that refused wearing it, went back to it. She learns from her second cousin that wearing a scarf makes people “take you more seriously” (157). This new attitude gives her a chance to criticize the double standards of the Egyptian society which is willing to forgive men and ready to accuse women. She resorts to the image of the wolf and the prey, and remarks: “Whatever a man did, after all, was in his nature, rather as a domesticated wolf could be understood, if not excused, for preying on the chicken in the coop. For the chicken in the coop, however, or the farmer who left the coop unlocked, there was no sympathy” (209).

Thus, Gigi is critical about both old and new homes and tries to find in-between space for herself. This may fall under Bhabha’s concept of “The Third Space.” Being at her new home, Gigi longs for the traditions and values of her old home. Coming to her old home, she is longing to the strength of the state in her new home. Being frustrated about the situation in her old home, Gigi begins to feel “homesick” for New Hampshire, “for snow, rain, changing skies, pure air; for a long walk on a Fall day; the brilliant russet and gold of leaves that change colour; the snow-muffled silence of the woods...” (211). Many of the things she longs

for in her snowy city represent a criticism of the things she lacks at her ancestral home; she enumerates them: “I longed for a world in which you did not constantly lose the battle against dust and baksheesh; for release from the pressures of traffic and people; for freedom from watchful eyes, for anonymity, an uncomplicated existence” (211). The last part of the novel reveals Gigi’s feelings of longing and reluctance at the same time for her two homes.

It is obvious that Gigi’s disappointment with her homeland is somehow related to the selling of the family home, the Cairo house from which the novel derives its title representing the loss of the position that the Pashas enjoyed while being in rule. Similarly, her discomfort in her new home stems from the racial and materialistic nature of the new home. Thus, like many Arab-Americans, Gigi is with ambivalent feelings of wanting to stay on and fearing to do so reflect that she is not “completely at home in either culture” (“Reflections and Refractions” 197).

2.3.5 Constructing the Arab (Hyphen) American Identity

Arab-Americans were and still the suspicious ‘Others’ and for this many Arab-Americans prefer to remain invisible. Gigi, while blending into her new “home”, remained silent about her past. Out of her crisis of identity in her new home, only one character learned that she was previously married and had a son from her first marriage. Moreover, Gigi felt like those “‘sleeper’ agents . . . popular in Cold War fiction,” for people only knew one facet of her character (*The Cairo House* 141). This silence puts her under the words of the Arab-American critic, Majaj, that: “While the incidents that first made me afraid to reveal myself in the United States were minor . . . they were enough to thrust me firmly back into a desire for invisibility. I sought anonymity as if trying to erode the connections that had brought me,

juncture by juncture...” (Majaj, “Boundaries,” 79-80). The perfect symbol suggesting invisibility, changing skin and the idea of metamorphosis is the chameleon. Consequently, Majaj uses it and writes: “Silence made it possible for me to blend into my surroundings, chameleon-like; it enabled me to absorb without self revelation what I needed to know” (Majaj, “Boundaries,” 79-80). On the same vein, Gigi makes use of this image more than once in this part and describes herself as one; for she “had tried to blur her edges and lose her accent” since she came to New Hampshire (142). This leitmotif is very significant in the novel whose prologue is entitled the “Chameleon.” In an interview with Seraheldin, she states that:

The chameleon is a very significant image for me, both personally and as a writer. It is at the heart of what the novel is about: what resonates, even with a reader who has no connection to the Middle East, is the universal experience of the expatriate, of those who have more than one skin. (Hayward. n. pag.)

Serageldin admits that there are some similarities between her and Gigi. This is obvious from the image of the chameleon which implies the necessity to blend with the surrounding to survive. In the prologue, she writes:

But the true chameleons are the ones who straddle two worlds, segueing smoothly from one to the other, adjusting language and body language, calibrating the range of emotions displayed, treading the tightrope of mannerisms and mores. If it is done well, it can look deceptively effortless, but it is never without cost. There is no hypocrisy involved, only the universal imperative underlying good manners: to do the appropriate thing, to make

those around you comfortable. For the chameleon, it is a matter of survival.

(1-2)

Gigi's second part of the hyphen started to be constructed in New Hampshire where she stayed for ten years, during which snowy landscape provides her with a new home and identity. In such situation, Gigi like other Arab-Americans is struggling to construct her identity in a new home. Unlike other immigrants, Gigi's problem is that she has no family members in the new "home" and this adds to the burden of her sense of being rootless. She is carrying the burden of the first part of the hyphen and living the ambiguity and the burden of the other half of herself, she writes: "some part of her mind ... had difficulty recognizing the Gigi of old in the woman she had become in this northern town of snow capped steeples and ice hockey" (139, 138). Thus, she needs to go back to her homeland to disentangle her original culture and true self from the intricate web of daily life in her American context which becomes the other side of her hyphenated identity.

The true home is an imagined one shaped by the experience of Gigi. This "Third Space" or hyphenated identity or in-betweenness is a common phenomenon that many Arab-Americans and people of other ethnic groups experience in the U.S. The created home on the hyphen is going to be as open-ended as Joanna Kadi's concept of maps: "I know it is possible and I know it is necessary to create maps that are alive, many layered multi dimensional, open ended, and braided" (Kadi, xiv). In that home, Gigi will realize, like Majaj that "identities cannot be neatly divided;" and that is "constructed and reconstructed.... [they] embody the demarcation of possibilities at particular junctures" (Majaj, "Boundaries" 82, 83). Gigi will remain, as Majaj rightly put it "grounded in both history [her past] and alienation [her American context]" which makes her identity as an Arab-American "an on-

going negotiation of difference” (Majaj, “Boundaries” 83, 84). In Gigi’s journey between the two sides of her identity, she surveyed the people, places and experiences that constructed her own personality and tried to seek her true identity through an investigating based on the question those benefits from the past and the present homes to build the future on an imagined home between the two.

Thus, the whole novel revolves around the question of “where do I belong?” (2). Unfortunately, the answer to that question lies in the hyphen-between the two poles of the identity. A positive reading of living on the hyphen allows the members of such community to negotiate the two parts of the hyphen and operate as mediators between two different worlds. This kind of negotiation is particularly important for Arab-Americans who live in a world which wages wars on their homelands and keep suspicious about their loyalty to the new home. Having a hyphenated identity allows them a space to create a balance and consequently get their voices heard by the two clashing worlds. This leads Arab-Americans to take the challenge of reconciling the two cultures bridging the gap between the two different worlds.

2.3.6 Conclusion

The Cairo House negotiates the Arab and the American parts of identity. The author presents her emotional ties to her Arab heritage in many ways, thus multiplying the factors that shape her Arab-American identity and complicating her representation. Historical events in Egypt, specifically Pashas’ dispossession and exile define her Arab historical persona. Interestingly, despite obvious social, economic, and national factors that shape her

hyphenated identity, her relationship with her son and other members of her family informs the manner in which she negotiates her Arab heritage.

More importantly, the issue of the hyphenated identity and the construction of a third space are central issues to all Arab-Americans. *The Cairo House* begins with Gigi on a plane taking her home and ends with her on board another plane taking her back to another home. Between the two flights there is a long journey of seeking the true self and searching for the true home. The situation of Gigi is common to many Arab-Americans who feel tangled between the two poles of identity. Explaining her sense of having this kind of hyphenated identity, Darraj in *Scheherazade's Legacy* summarizes the whole story by stating that:

When I felt disconnected from either half of my identity, their [Arab and Arab-American women] words helped me find my way. When I questioned my feminism and my own strength, they reminded me that Arab women are always strong, always resilient. When I despaired at ever fitting in, ever finding my true voice, they reminded me that my identity is to be found somewhere in between the two worlds I call home. (Introduction 2-3)

One can conclude that Arab-American women are trying to construct and shape what it means to be Arab-American women. This is evident in their literary writings and memoirs discussed in this chapter. In addition to dispelling the stereotypes, Arab-American women writers aim at finding for themselves a space as an ethnic group in America by articulating both aspects of their cultures, Arab and American. This is a place in between cultures which belongs wholly to neither. It is an articulation that is not easy since being Arab has a negative connotation in the American mainstream through images like harem girl, religious fanatic, terrorist, and passive women. Bhabha talked of the spaces in between cultures as ones that

“provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood singular or communal-that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself” (*The Location of Culture* 1-2).

Gigi in Serageldin’s *The Cairo House* is still in the process of constructing this kind of identity. Like many Arabs who live in exile due to political reasons, deprived of their homeland, Serageldin’s misplaced “home”, deprived of a specific location, reveals the relationship between the exilic identity and “home” as a multi-located and contested site better viewed from the third space between the two sides. The space in-between is strikingly depicted through the flight between Egypt and U.S. where Gigi can comfortably contemplate the two sides of her identity from the “hyphen” between Egypt and the U.S.--Arab-American.

It is also of importance to note that the three writers, Nawal El Sadaawi, Elmaz Abinader, and Samia Serajuldin, discussed in this chapter, deal with issues of history, politics, cultures, war, gender, and identity. Each writer approaches each of these subjects according to the individual, historical, national, and geopolitical contexts. It is also interesting to note that while El Sadaawi is struggling to bring a change in the Egyptian society of the 1970s, Serageldine’s *The Cairo House* highlights the change that took place in socio-political and economic aspects of the Egyptian society since she left Egypt at Nasser’s mandate up to the 1990s. The three works are informed by different political events that shaped each of the respective Arab and Arab-American communities. The historical period has determined the identities of the members of each society and their relationships within and outside their geographical location. Highlighting such issues, the Arab and Arab-American women show an awareness of their roles in contributing to the solution of the

problems of their respective societies. The three women writers emphasize the importance of socio-cultural and political negotiations within and across their respective societies and suggest solutions to each issue they raise in their texts.

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Chapter Three

Histories and Voices of Resistance: War, Nationalism, and

(neo)Colonialism

(Ghada Al-Samman, Sahar Khalifeh, and Ahlam Mosteghanemi)

3.1 Divided Na(rra)tions: Ghada Al-Samman Rewriting Politics, Society and War in *Beirut 75* and *Beirut Nightmares*¹ (1976)

It is not because of woman's cowardice, incapacity, nor, above all, because of her general superior virtue, that she will end war when her voice is fully, finally, and clearly heard.

(Olive Schreiner. "Women and War" in *Woman and Labour* 49)

Life taught me that escape from my real identity was futile. I am the daughter of this land, the daughter of the boilingly turbulent Arab world. I am the daughter of this war. This is my destiny. ... I did participate in creating this war. ... My writings always carried a cry for change, to remove ugliness from the face of this homeland and wash it with justice, joy, freedom, and equality. All that the fighters are doing is executing that in their own way. They are my letters, coming out of my books, taking the shape of human beings carrying arms and fighting. Did I really want a revolution without blood? Yes, I am—like all artists —contradicting myself.

(Ghada Al-Samman, *Beirut Nightmares* 41)

¹ *Beirut Nightmares* (1975) is the sequel novel of *Beirut 75* (1976)

To contextualize the discussion of the war novel by the contemporary Syrian-Lebanese woman writer, Ghada Al-Samman, it is necessary to shed light on the status of women in Syria and Lebanon. Greater Syria included what is known now as Syria, Jordan, Palestine, and Lebanon. These four countries share socio-cultural backgrounds. Syria is historically advanced in the matter of women's rights compared to other Arab countries, except Egypt. Women's cultural activities began in Aleppo and Damascus in the late 19th century (Jabbour 2). The League of Lebanese Women was founded in 1943. This association, headed by Najla Sab, played an active role in the events that led to Lebanon's independence including holding political meetings and demonstrations. In 1950, after independence, it elected an executive committee to work to guarantee women's political rights in the country. This committee presented to the newly elected president a petition demanding political equality for women as well as the right to hold public positions. In 1953 Lebanese women won the unrestricted right to vote (Zeidan 37).

The place of women in Syria and Lebanon today defies traditional classification, although these women must tackle many of the problems faced by women globally. Key issues of concern for women include--but are not limited to--human rights, gender discrimination, equal opportunity, fairer laws relating to household expenses, violence against women, marriage annulment, divorce, alimony, and custody laws.

Survey findings of October 2003 revealed that in 80% of divorce or separation cases Lebanese law gave custody of children to the father. Subsequently the Lebanese Council to Resist Violence against Women lobbied for change in legislation and the outdated 'Lebanese Personal Status Law' which gives men overwhelming power, looking upon women as the private property of men (Carter 47).

Perhaps due to their socialist leanings and connections with the former Soviet Union, women in Syria have enjoyed equal opportunities and excelled in fields such as education, health, engineering and architecture, and have attained good positions in the legal and political fields. Twenty four of the 250 members of parliament are women, and two are ministers. The General Women's Union, established in 1967, has branches across the country, and has worked hard to encourage women to take up more active social and political roles (48).

3.1.1 The Context and Milieu

The 1975 civil war in Lebanon and its tragic results for the Arab world in general and the Lebanese people in particular, provided the raw material for many novels. Joseph Zeidan in *Modern Arab Women Novelists* finds that the endless day-to-day human suffering, the civil strife that took on religious and political dimensions, and the interference of outside forces all became themes that writers of fiction tried to capture and dramatize. The volume of the women's contributions to fiction on the Lebanese civil war is impressive (91). Ghadah Al Samman, who lived in Beirut since 1964, actually foresaw the civil war. Most of her female characters meet a tragic fate due to the war as the ultimate victims of both political and social violence.

This study on Ghada Al-Samman's war novel interrogates the denial of Arab women's role in war. The analysis of the correlation between the historical and the social, political and psychological role of women during the war in Lebanon elaborates the interaction between the politics of gender and war politics. My analysis attempts to study the violence, corruption, poverty, gender inequalities, honour killing, sectarianism, prostitution

and class issues in relation to national problems in the Arab societies. The nightmares are explicit in *Beirut Nightmares* and reflect the 1975 civil war in Lebanon. The protagonist of *Kawabis Bayrut*² [Beirut Nightmares] Sadia of Sahar Khalifeh is a strong woman who achieves a sense of fulfilment. She refuses to let the war drive her away from her home, while her brother becomes obsessed with the thought of leaving. In fact, throughout her life she has been as independent as a man is expected to be: "Since my adolescence I have worked and supported myself, and lived my life like any 'man' in the family" (36). In such conditions of the contemporary Arab societies, Arab women show concerns for national unity and identity more sensitively rather than merely focussing on domestic matters.

In *Beirut 75*, the Civil War is used as a backdrop to expose the social, political, and economic failings of the Arab society in the 1970s showing how these weaknesses are clearly the ideal recipe for a civil war resulting in foreign intervention in the region.

3.1.2 *Beirut 75*: The Text

The novel *Beirut 75* is divided into five chapters with each chapter introducing a story that can stand on its own. The first chapter of introduces the main characters travelling in a taxi from Damascus to Beirut. Two of them are Syrians fleeing a miserable past and hoping to become rich and famous and realize their dreams in Beirut. Yasminah comes from a family so conservative that her mother still wears the veil, but she herself is completely different from her mother, for example, in the taxi she is wearing a short dress that shows her legs. She has run away from the boredom of her job as a teacher at a convent where "the days

² Ghada Al-Samman in *Beirut 75* almost predicted every single cause for the civil war that indeed erupted one month after the publication of the novel and was the first Arab novelists to write about it in her novel *Beirut Nightmares* (1976).

passed by as heavy as an anesthetized body on an operating table” (9). She has two main reasons for deciding to go to Beirut: she wants the freedom to form relationships that are impossible in Damascus, where women are expected to suppress their romantic feelings; and she wants to exploit Beirut’s wealth of publishing houses in search of success as a poet. The other Syrian passenger is Farah, a handsome young man blessed with a beautiful voice. He is fleeing a boring job as a clerk and is travelling to Beirut with a letter of recommendation from his father to a relative named Nishan. This Nishan had moved to Beirut earlier and has become rich, famous and influential there. The taxi driver is mute, he neither speaks nor smiles throughout the whole trip and is as cold and impersonal as though delivering the passengers to a cemetery. Yasminah and Farah are sitting in the front seat; in the back are seated three veiled women covered from head to toe in black as though they were going to a funeral. Farah refers to them as “the sorceresses of fate”. The three women get out of the taxi as soon as it crosses the Lebanese-Syrian border, leaving Yasminah and Farah alone to face an uncertain future.

When the taxi comes closer to Beirut, the evil omens become clearer. People are celebrating Eid Al-Saleeb³ [the Festival of the Cross] and the smell of burning wood makes Farah ill at ease, feeling “as if I were at a ritual where a human sacrifice had been offered to a vicious god” (9). When they look down upon the city at night from the mountains, “Beirut, at the bottom of darkness, looked bright and shining like the finery of a sorceress who had come down to the sea to swim at night, leaving on the shore her pearls and jewels and colorful magic things, her boxes of evil and happiness inlaid with ivory, her sandals and amulets and secrets” (10). The novel introduces Yasminah’s story in Beirut as she lies nude on the yacht of her new boyfriend Namir. It is the first time she takes off her clothes and

³ A holiday celebrated by the Arab Christians

thinks about her former self: “How could she have carried her body all these years like a burden, a corpse, a mere instrument to move around and to carry pieces of chalk? Now she is discovering it as a world of pleasures” (15). Taking off her clothes on the yacht is the beginning of Yasminah’s ‘fall’ as she still cannot get out of her shell--the rigidity of tradition. Yasminah and Namir are not alone on the yacht; in one corner is a slow-moving turtle, unable to get out of its shell to enjoy the sun, symbolizing Yasminah’s inability to free her body without being destined to a tragic fate.

The political events and social injustice that led to the civil strife in Lebanon serve as a background for Yasminah and Farah as they pursue fame and riches. When Israeli jets roar over Beirut and shatter windows, both Yasminah and the turtle are frightened. Namir, however, is indifferent, claiming carelessly that the planes will not shell anybody except the Palestinian guerrillas. The Israeli planes show up again when Farah is looking for Nishan in the luxurious Al-Hamra street in Beirut. He sees a group of Lebanese watching a man making a small monkey dance. Only the monkey seems to respond to the threatening sound of the planes: “It buried its face in the pavement and turned its rear to the audience, and began crying with a sad voice” (18).

Mustafa is the only character in *Beirut 75* who manages to find salvation in the urban inferno. His father has worked as a fisherman for thirty years, during which he had been exploited by the powerful families who control the fishing industry. The father wants to find a magic lantern that will pull him out of his poverty. When his eldest son dies at sea, he makes Mustafa abandon his studies and come home to help him in the fishing business. Mustafa, who has seen enough of the miserable conditions in which the fishermen live, dedicates himself to helping them organize themselves to fight for their rights.

By the end of the novel Namir abandons Yasminah to marry the daughter of a rich man, a match more in line with his own selfish interests. Left alone in the cruel city, Yasminah turns for help to her brother, a resident of Beirut. She is hopeless and the only other avenue available to her is prostitution. Yasminah does not become a prostitute, but her fate is nevertheless tragic: her brother kills her, not because she tarnished the family honor as he claims, but because she is unable to buy his silence by providing him with money (88-91).

3.1.3 Many Battles: Gender Inequality, War, and Sexuality

Unlike some of her earlier short stories, *Beirut 75* gives a realistic characterization of the innocent and poor being corrupted and cheated by an unjust society. Despite the greater realistic treatment of her characters, it must also be noted that at times it is difficult to distinguish between the reality and the dream as the author moves very quickly between the two. This of course reflects the social confusion of the time. This confusion climaxes at the end of the novel in a nightmare sequence of blood, the city's welcoming sign being transformed into the name of a local mental asylum. Al-Samman seems to be telling us that suffering and struggle do not end in *Beirut 75* but will continue as *Kawabis Beirut* (Beirut Nightmares), her next novel.

One of the major themes in *Beirut 75* is social injustice that includes the issue of gender inequality and the injustices practiced against women in the society. The issue of sexuality raised in *Beirut 75* is interconnected to other social, economic, and political corruptions which end up with war and death. In the introduction to her book *Sexuality and War, Literary Masks of the Middle East* (1995), Evelyne Accad highlights the different attitudes male and female writers show towards war and violence. The male view, inherently

destructive, “wants to get rid of the sinner [an image of Beirut], the whore, source of all evils, decadence, and problems of modern existence. The total and violent destruction of the woman is seen as the only way out of an inextricable situation. On the other hand, the female perspective, loving and life-giving feels sorry for the woman and the city– both victims of rape and violence (1-2). Mediterranean customs are accused. Hypocrisy and the oppression of women are presented as the origin of madness and the destruction of the city. In the novel *Beirut 75* the author deals with these issues as they relate directly to Lebanese society just before the civil war erupted. In this context, Al-Samman’s novel is almost prophetic in that its characterization and setting lay bare the complex and corrupt roots of the strife. It is to be noted that women’s issues are not an overriding concern here but are taken up by Al-Samman more as part of the social setting rather than a separate and distinct topic unto itself.

Accad bases her arguments about sexuality and war in the ‘Middle East’ on studies in psychology and socio-politics and her own sociological research in Arab lands. I find some of her ideas useful to analyze the war novels of Ghada Al-Samman. In *Sexuality and War, Literary Masks of the Middle East*, Evelyne Accad uses the “masks” to refer to ambivalent attitudes towards others, whether opponents or close females relations. Sexuality, according to Accad, involves not only “the physical and psychological relations between men and women, or the sexual act in itself, but also the customs-Mediterranean, Lebanese, and traditional-involved in relations between men and women and the feelings of love, power, violence, and tenderness as well as the notions of territory attached to possession and jealousy” (2).

In the context of *Beirut 75* Al-Samman implies what has only been felt and thought by her sex, that is, woman’s longing to appreciate and enjoy the beauty of the male body in

the same way men have always appreciated and enjoyed the female body. She also exposes the social hypocrisy practice which victimize women and make them subject of exploitation.

The protagonist asserts:

I started to cry and he stopped me with a kiss. Then we went to the casino to gamble, as he usually gambles when he is angry or pretending to be so. The trip to the casino was prearranged. There, an important Bey came up to us, greeted us and introduced his daughter to him, a girl with an ordinary face wearing extraordinary jewellery. And when I heard her name-- Miss Nailah Al-Salamuni--, Mr. Salamuni's his personal political and social advantage. . . . I have crossed all the bridges. I have stopped walking. It is true that he spends his money generously on me, and I spend his money on my brother who pretends that he does not see what is going on around him because of my money. (39-40)

Al-Samman emphasizes the hypocrisy and ambivalent moral standards existing in the Arab society. Yasminah's brother does not moralize about her illicit relationship with her lover. Only when the money stops do morality and honour enter the picture, and only then must the heroine die in the name of honour. Along with the social and material differences, the author highlights the emotional differences between man and woman in terms of physical relations, social norms and moral codes which are patriaschal. Al-Samman emphasizes that in such relationships, the Arab woman be the loser:

Al-Samman emphasizes not just physical pain, but also the psychological torture and mental anguish that a woman experiences. The doubts which arise out of her dilemma are due to the uncertainty of her relationship with the man she loves. Al-Samman further

illustrates the issues of injustice, the double standard, and the inferiority of women in the Arab world thus:

Beirut did not ruin you. You all reproach Beirut, but the seeds of ruin are inside you. All Beirut has done, was to bring them out in the open and give them a place to grow.

But I am not a prostitute. I love you, and in the beginning of our relationship you always mentioned marriage.

Marriage? you fool. Do you believe that I can marry a woman who gave herself to me before marriage?

Why not? Did't you proudly tell me that you advised your father to list 'equality and liberation of women among his priorities when he ran for election?

He did not answer, but muttered, "Would I marry a woman I slept with before marriage and before the wedding night?" (52)

Al- Samman, however, is not the only writer who is aware of such issues. Nawal El Sadaawi in *Two Women in One* (1968) has expressed dismay with the traditions which reinforce male superiority over the female.

For women, there are no privileges. They are required to remain virgin until their marriage. If they show any interest or experience in sexual matters before marriage they are considered either "fallen women" or prostitutes, and are regarded as undesirable candidates for marriage. Even within marriage, the author points out, a woman is not supposed to enjoy sex, but merely be an instrument of reproduction. In the context of *Beirut 75*, it is explained:

But she cannot believe that what has happened to her has really taken place. She is like his wife; she loves him, lives with him and is faithful to him. She gives him everything, and does not want anything in this world except him. She was still a virgin until he had her. She did not know any other man. Why then doesn't he marry her? (41)

The confessional technique is used to illustrate the vulnerability and emotion of the woman protagonist. It is a human cry, not of unrequited love but of unfulfilled promises. The man, of course, does not and will not marry her for traditional, religious, and moral reasons. They know this and lament. But it is the only reality for them. This psychological revelation plays a great part in understanding the woman's emotions and the state of her mind. The despair which she feels envelops her and causes her to wonder if the results would have been the same if she had been more promiscuous:

If I had known another man before Namir, if they had let my body enjoy an equal relationship in Damascus, would I have been this lost? (88)

Al-Samman's protagonist stands here as a representative of the "oppressed" woman in the Arab world. This oppression, instead of discouraging the woman from indulging in sexual activities, actually pressures her into perversion as a result of socio-political corruptions that lead to many forms of war. The injustices also weaken her rational faculties and release her unchannelled emotions into some form of madness. As this behaviour is closely connected to the traditional socio-cultural values, society, asserts Al-Samman, is responsible for the protagonist's behaviour, and should therefore stop the name-calling. Accad in finds a link between nationalism and women's issues and thinks that a blend of the two will rid the 'Middle East' of violence, a constructive approach which, though it may

seem farfetched, is based on the author's experience and research. Accad deplores the misuse of "honour" and "leadership" to perpetrate horrors against women and country, claiming that men usually channel their destructive tendencies through a wilful misunderstanding of these concepts. Fixations inculcated in the souls of men are best neutralized, in Accad's opinion, through non-violent action allied with nationalism and feminism (19-20). Al-Samman, in turn, through this novel, shows examples from reality which illustrates Accad's statement.

3.1.4 Exploitation, Violence and Misuse of Power

In the characterization of Namir, Nishan, and Fadil Bey Al-Salamuni, the author gives us a vivid picture of the bourgeoisie, their life and their attitude. Al-Samman demonstrates the difference between the classes which allow the landowners and the rich to make and break the law and abuse the powerless. They discriminate against the working class and drag everyone into their petty concerns and wars. Men and women alike become their victims and whoever presents a threat to their regime is destroyed. An example of this can be seen in Abu Mustafa the fisherman who suffers from tuberculosis, but does not receive any sympathy or help from the community. Al-Samman concludes with dramatic objectivity that the poor, especially women, cannot survive with dignity in such a society. The discrimination and the injustice which the poor suffer from is illustrated in scenes such as this:

Mustafa's relationship with all living beings was not broken, instead, it had gone to sleep and in its place was a bond that tied him to all the suffering fish on earth like his father and himself-those who were lost in the harsh labyrinth of life in Beirut. Those were forced to swim in the sewers despite their

longing for freedom, sunlight, and fresh water. He was busy fighting alongside the Sakini and the Salamuni families, and their class which takes the food from his mouth. His romantic ear was no longer able to listen to the cry of the fish in the net. He now listens to the moaning of people around him and to his own, to the moaning of the men who face the storm, the sea, darkness, and the elements, while Namir Al-Salamuni and his class lie asleep in their yachts. (78)

Al-Samman tells us that all the dreams of the poor have been taken away. Yet there remains with the poor fisherman a single dream that one day he will find a crystal ball and have a genie that will appear and grant his wishes. This kind of myth becomes a crutch for the poor because 'reality' is quite painful and disillusioning, often may lead to their death:

For thirty years, he [Abu Mustafa] fought the waves, looking for the genie.

For thirty years he cast his net and searched its contents for the crystal ball. . .

He threw his net and lit the dynamite, all that he had of it. And before he

heard his son's and the men's cries, he jumped into the water. His body

became an explosion of dynamite to catch the crystal ball. Mustafa's scream

was heard as the dynamite exploded. Even the water roared, and then

everything became calm. The waves became dark. A torn corpse was seen on the surface of the water next to the torn nets. (79)

Once again in this passage Al-Samman presents the reader with the contrast of the lives of the classes in Beirut. When she was forced to leave Namir's house to go to Nishan's, she is frightened by the poor man, so great is her fear of personal poverty. This fear becomes a part of her being, as she shudders at the possibility of being married to a poor man. Having

become accustomed to a life of luxury and extravagance, she can not imagine a life with a poor man who snores all night. Nor can she imagine herself running after children all day. After her experience with wealth, she can never think of returning to a state of poverty and deprivation. But for now, she has to decide whether she would move into Nishan's apartment or move to her brother's place. She had, in the end, to choose between being a neglectful lover or a successful prostitute.

Yasminah is killed by her brother who destroyed all evidence. In this instance, we see that the death of the poor must pass undefended and unnoticed in the face of the bribes of the wealthy Namir. If there indeed is any attempt to defend honour on the part of Yasminah's brother, it was quickly bought out by Namir's move to silence the truth of the affair. Al-Samman, very graphically illustrates in this case just how hollow the concept of honour is in Arab society.

I am Namir Faris Al- Sakini. How can you claim that I disgraced your honour, you dog. It should be an honour to you that I, the son of Sakini, slept with your sister. . . The first file has been destroyed. They will soon interrogate you again, and you will repeat what you had said, that you killed your sister for honour. You will have to forget my name completely. . . You will say that she had affairs with several other men. Do not mention my name, but accuse her of practicing prostitution with many strangers. (90)

Namir's wealth helps him to reverse the truth, and his bribes assist him in twisting the evidence in the crime against Yasminah. As emphasized by the author, there can be no hope for the poor or for women in a society controlled by wealth and ancient traditions of false honour. The wealthy make the laws and break them; they legislate health and welfare rules,

manipulate funds and ensure that any action of the “unions” which they have allowed to exist do not create problems for the management. All of this leaves the lower class manoeuvre:

The reader may question the accuracy of Al-Samman’s portrayal of the life of the poor, and wonder if she is merely generalizing on the strength of what could be a particular situation. Some obvious questions may be: Do the poor really have nothing in life to look forward to? Do they live and survive without aspiration or ambition? Al-Samman exploits this picture of despair in her description of sexual exploitation. After emphasizing the frustration which the fisherman and the rest of the poor experience, she elaborates on the fact that there is no release or pleasure other than sex that one can have when faced with such poverty and injustice. It is, she asserts, a pleasure created out of frustration and despair. Ironically, however, the price of sexual release is very high, it is another mouth to feed, since birth control and family planning are not available to this class. I agree with Accad’s argument that “there is a need for a new rapport between men and women, women and women, men and men: there is a need for relationships based on trust, recognition of the other, tenderness, equal sharing, and love devoid of jealousy and possession” (114).

Throughout the novel, violence, corruption, prostitution, and class issues are related to national problems. The Arab peasant safeguards the land of the country he lives in; he will live and die to protect his home and family. The rich do not care about the land or about the national struggle, however, and do not bother to involve themselves in such matters. The rich even use Israeli words to express their disillusion with the proletariat. He calls the Palestinian commandos “fidaiyeen” terrorists just like the Israelis. In this context, one of the M.P.’s tells his poor peasant:

I always advised you and warned the people of the village not to hide the “terrorists”, and you haven’t stopped. You call them “fidaiyeen” but they are the cause of the destruction of the village. (*Beirut 75 46*)

Later, when the peasant questions the M.P.’s sincerity and awareness of his electorate by quoting a verse from the Quran, “Say: Do and God, His Prophet and the faithful will see your deed,” the peasant received a slap on the face and was told by the M.P. to shut up.

Revenge is another issue which the Arab man is obsessed with whenever he is subjected to defend one principle or another. For instance, Tian who becomes a pharmacist after his graduation from a foreign university, feels trapped in tribal traditions and thus becomes the victim of revengeful circumstances. Al-Samman’s satirical narrative describes the hateful destructive principle of revenge in the Arab world. Tian has no control over his life despite his education. Till his death, he lives in a state of paranoia of being followed: “Do you think that I am hallucinating? I imagine that every man in the street is following me: My nerves are finished. I must withdraw to my hideout. I must . . .” (61)

3.1.5 Conclusion

Beirut 75 deals with three issues of politics, sexuality, and war which are interconnected through characterizations and settings. The political commentary is presented through glimpses of the social and sexual events in which the characters participate and her descriptions of the environment in which they take place. What is not clear, however, is a specific political ideology; Al-Samman allows us glimpses and insights, but there is no real unification of these ideas.

Each of the five chapters of the novel can stand on its own merits, but together they become one single novel which portrays and explains to a great extent the life and atmosphere not only of Beirut but of the Arab World in the 1970s. In the beginning of the novel, Al-Samman chooses Beirut as a haven. Most of her characters dream of the wealth and luxury awaiting them in Beirut. Farah, for one, claims that he will return to Damascus rich and famous. Yasminah also prematurely claims that she will also return in the same manner, as she had had enough of her life as a teacher in the convent school and now wanted her freedom. But the poor, asserts the author, are destined to remain poor unless there is a drastic social revolution within society. Their dreams must remain dreams until the time that society itself will no longer be bound by its self-imposed restrictions of class, wealth, and gender roles. In this context, it is certainly not coincidental that the five characters in the novel are victims of social, economic, and political conflicts. They all begin their relationships to life in Beirut in one car at the beginning of the novel and travel together towards their unfortunate, yet predictable, destinies. Beirut thus becomes a symbol of discrimination, class struggle, and practically 'every other problem in human experience'. In this sense, Ghali Shukri considers this a great novel describing Beirut as boiling with highly explosive ingredients, and finally exploding (121).

Rita Stephan in her article "Arab Women Writing their Sexuality" argues that El Sadaawi and Al-Samman have attacked patriarchal practices such as domestic violence and poverty which plague women in the contemporary Arab/Muslim nation-state. I have tried to show that sexuality is more central to the social, economic and political conflicts and that unless gender equality is incorporated into political change, there can be no transformation in the social, economic and political conditions. As Andrea Dworkin put it: "To transform the

world, we must transform the very substance of our gender sensibilities and we must do so as consciously and as conscientiously as we do any act which involves our whole lives” (qtd. in Accad “Sexuality, War, and Literature” 41). I argue that Al-Samman’s main purpose is not to attack the patriarchal system, or fight for sexual freedom, but to show that war results from social, political, and economic problems which destroy the ambitions of, and victimize, both men and women. Al-Samman is more interested in showing the interconnection between war, social injustices, political corruption and prostitution. The result of all these afflictions is destruction of the nation and death of people.

Thus, Al-Samman in *Beirut 75* debunks the social, political, and economic failings of Arab/Lebanese society. All sociopolitical and economic crises inevitably busk an environment for a civil war, which whammed a month after the novel was published. Al-Samman foreshadows the catastrophe in this novel. At one point in the novel, Fadil Bey Al-Salamuni, a morally corrupt aristocrat and a member of parliament, visits Fayizah the fortune-teller to ask about his prospects for advancing further in Lebanese political life. Fayizah’s forecast is far from rosy: “I see much sadness. I see blood. Plenty of blood” (48). It is also to be remembered here that throughout the realistic events of *Beirut 75*, Al-Samman, tries to alert the reader to every single conflict not only in Beirut, but throughout the Arab world. She is very careful to select issues and events pertaining to these conflicts and reveal them in a very bold and realistic way. In *Beirut 75* Al-Samman’s connects the domestic issues to the national and moves to the international. She is aware that the social, economic and political problems will lead to a riot and civil war that can affect Lebanon and the whole Arab world. This situation serves the colonizers’ motives to justify intervention in Lebanon. More importantly, the meaning of this novel can be felt today in any country of the Arab

world. Though Al-Samman deals with issues of politics, gender, culture, war and nation, her attitude and perspective in addressing these contemporary concerns of the Arab society are different from those of other contemporary Arab women writers examined in this study.

3.2 The Question of Palestine: Nationalist Ideologies, Colonialist Policies, and Genderless Struggle(s) in Sahar Khalifeh's *Al-Subar* [Wild Thorns] and *Abbad Ash-Shams* [Sunflower] (1980)

[T]heir history, their stories, constitute the locus of our displacement. It's not that we have a territory of our own; but their fatherland, family, home, discourse, imprison us in enclosed spaces where we cannot keep on moving, living, as ourselves. Their properties are our exile. Their enclosures, the death of our love. Their words, the gag upon our lips.

(Luce Irigaray, "When our Lips Speak Together" 212)

The occupation! The word had so many meanings. Exile: a reality we experience in the heart of the motherland itself. Torture: a topic defined to perfection by the pimps of politics at the United Nations. Sink in the mud, Palestine, kiss the world goodbye!

(Sahar Khalifeh, *Wild Thorns* 56)

Throughout the political history of the Arab World, no turbulent problem so preoccupied the minds and hearts of the Arab people as the Palestinian question, especially after the June 1967 War. At a time when most men were crippled by a sense of frustration in the aftermath of the 1967 invasion, women carried the burden of ensuring a greater degree

of compliance with family needs in a difficult environment. Novels written on this subject by Arab women and Arab-American, especially by Palestinian women, are particularly significant in that the search for personal identity became absorbed in the search for national identity, even to the extent of sacrificing the former for the sake of the latter. To the authors, the present matters only insofar as it is the outcome of the past. Therefore they push aside the immediate problems of struggling for individual freedom and emphasize the fight for freedom from the immediate Israeli occupation.

3.2.1 The Palestinian Women and the National Cause

It is significant that Palestinian women are recognized as the first Arab women to have organized themselves in the political sense. Miriam Cooke in *War's Other Voices* notes that Palestinian women organized themselves politically and, as early as 1917, reacted to Jewish settlement in Palestine by organizing demonstrations against the inflow of Jews to Palestine (5). In 1920, they formed a delegation to ask the British authorities to intervene against Zionist immigration. In 1921, they founded the Palestine Women's Union. In the following decades, they have been engaged in direct struggle as well as charitable work. In 1964, with the creation of the P.L.O [Palestinian Liberation Organization], Palestinian women, already politically visible and members of the main political factions, participated in the P.L.O's first conference where they were formally asked to join the struggle. The 1967 war that ended with the Israeli occupation of Gaza Strip and the West Bank marked the shift of women's activism to the occupied territories. In the mid- 1970s, with the increasing displacement of Palestinians from their lands confiscated by the Israeli authorities, and the

accompanying economic and social dislocations, Palestinian women's resistance started shaping itself from below as seen in the increasing grassroots activism.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, various women's groups and organizations started focusing on the necessity for consciousness-raising whereby Palestinian women could be made aware of gender issues as well as their political rights and responsibilities towards both themselves and their nation. Palestinian women's activism culminated in the creation of women's research centres in the late 1980s. Besides their efficiency at a very practical level as manifest in the creation of consciousness-raising groups, and the organization of informative campaigns among many other activities, the centres provided a framework where Palestinian women scholars and activists could work together to formulate a clear women's agenda, and devise various strategies by which Palestinian women's rights could be preserved and their participation documented. However, despite their rich history of activism, Palestinian women activists today seem to be pessimistic as to the future of women's rights under the projected Palestinian state established by virtue of the Israelo-Palestinian Declaration of principles signed in Washington D.C on September 13th 1993.

3.2.2 *Wild Thorns* and *Sunflowers*: The Texts

Wild Thorns (1976) and its sequel, *Abad Ash-Shams* [Sunflower] (1980) are Sahar Khalifeh's third and fourth novels. In *Wild Thorns* Khalifeh depicts, in detail, life for Palestinians under Israeli occupation. *Wild Thorns* is the story of the Al-Karmi family as a microcosm of Palestinian culture. It narrates the story of four male characters, three of whom are laborers bussed daily to work in Israel. The fourth character, representing the young and more radical generation, is on a mission to destroy those buses. The different attitudes of the

characters toward taking jobs in Israel represent the different versions of nationalist ideologies among Palestinians. When Khalifeh wrote this novel the issue of working for the benefit of the occupying power was still being hotly debated in the West Bank, and this accounts for the prominence that issue receives in her work. Her third novel, *Sunflower* narrates the lives of three women, two of whom are respectively widow and girlfriend to two laborers encountered in the first work.

Sahar Khalifeh's *Wild Thorns* deals mainly with the conditions of West Bank day laborers bussed in daily to work in Israel. Khalifeh's strong point lies in her ability to depict the inner struggle of workers who must find a balance between meeting the financial needs of their families by working on building settlements, often on land confiscated from their own village, and their desire to assert national and individual rights. Her concerns with women's issues emerge mainly in *Abad El Shams* [Sunflower], a sequel to *Wild Thorns*, where she deals with the growing number of traditional women who suddenly find themselves single heads of households due to the incarceration or death of their husbands, fighting a battle on several fronts, including a psychological battle against the internalization of the traditional norms that hinder their ability to fully accept the responsibility of being sole breadwinner. The two novels by Sahar Khalifeh examined below offer a rare view into the thoughts and actions of a number of characters brought together through a common geographical location, an old and financially deprived alley in the town of Nablus. Khalifeh's *Wild Thorns* and *Sunflower* can be, to some extent, equated with the works of Nawal El Sadawi. Both employ the novel as a tool for investigating the role of women showing an equal concern for women's empowerment and nationalist issues. All female characters in Sahar's work are

stronger than they realize themselves to be. In brief, the two novels deal with the dichotomies of national-colonial, rich-poor, inside-outside, and men-women.

3.2.3 The Nationalist(s) Vs. The Colonizer

Wild Thorns engages the issue of Palestinian employment in Israel and the new economic and political realities which Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza came to face after the Israeli occupation of these territories in June 1967. Written just less than a decade after the occupation (1976), the novel exposes the dramatic effects which post-1967 Palestinian 'access' to the capitalist job market in Israel has had on Palestinian internal social relations and the Palestinian community's vision of its national struggle. The plot revolves around a young Palestinian from Nablus, Usama Al-Karmi, who, after several years of failingly trying his luck in Arab countries, comes back to the West Bank convinced that Palestinians have no rightful place to live in the many Arab countries with which they have had to contend since the occupation. So, he believes that the 'real' Palestinian struggle has to come from the "inside" and has to be fought "inside" the territories, not in the periphery.

With this ideology in mind, Usama seeks to find on the 'ground' in the territories the same image his political imaginary has constructed: namely, an uncorrupted and unyielding Palestinian resistance movement, a construction that soon proves incompatible with the actualities of people's daily politics there. Already embittered and alienated, Usama unequivocally rejects the notion of Palestinian work in Israel, considers it a form of "disintegration," and, unable to understand or deal with the social and economic dynamics which make such work both desirable and feasible to the Palestinians of the territories, resolves to preempt it in a single act of self-destructive violence. He thus sets out on a

mission to bomb the Israeli buses carrying Palestinian workers to Israel, including his friend Zuhdi and his cousin Adil-a mission for which he recruits his young cousin, Basil.

While Usama's plan of violence unfolds, Khalifeh masterfully explores through her cast of characters a number of ideological positions characteristic of the Palestinian social fabric during those trying decades. The character of Abu Adil, an old figure representing the Al-Karmi family, embodies the longlasting feudal structure of Palestinian society. A patriarch, he lives on an artificial kidney machine pouring blood into his failing system. He exploits Palestinian peasants working on his land, like Abu Shehadeh, while at the same time speaking to western journalists for Palestinian self-rule in the name of all Palestinians. He strikes up profitable matches for his young daughter Nuwar, but his son Adil is forced to provide for his expensive artificial kidney by working in an Israeli factory. The novel closes when Usama's ambush on the Israeli buses is carried out. Both Usama and Zuhdi fall dead, and the Israeli army responds by demolishing the Al-Karmi mansion whose basement Usama and Basil had used to make their explosives. Ironically, the demolition of the Al-Karmi mansion opens up a number of confused possibilities for the Palestinians who survive: Adil chooses to leave his father's kidney machine behind in the house, thus putting an end to his father's life and role in the community; Basil, Adil's brother who cooperated with Usama, goes to prison; at the same time, Nuwar is left with the possibility of choosing her own 'match' after her father's death.

3.2.4 Inside Vs. Outside

Despite the prominence of the Palestinian-Israeli national conflicts whose ideologies mobilize actions, polarize points of view, and provide the context for Usama's 'guerrilla'

event in the space of the novel, *Wild Thorns* is not about the national conflict per se. (Harlow “Narratives” 133). While the novel is no doubt embedded in the reality of the conflict and its narrative as a whole is affected by its consequences, the author’s insight turns instead on how the national crisis has forced new spatial and economic divisions on an already ambivalent and complex national space. In *After the Last Sky*, Edward Said tackles the inside-outside dichotomy which the 1967 war forced on Palestinian society. In a section with the heading “Interiors” Said writes:

[t]he phrase *min al-dakhil*, ‘from the interior,’ has a special resonance to the Palestinian ear. It refers, first of all, to regions of the interior of Israel, to territories and people still Palestinian despite the interdictions of the Israeli presence Until 1967, therefore, it meant the Palestinians who lived within Israel; after 1967 the phrase expanded to include the inhabitants of the West Bank, Gaza, and the Golan Heights, and since 1982 it has also meant the Palestinians (and Lebanese) of South Lebanon. (51)

The “interior” is the “inside,” or, as Said calls it, the “home,” the land from which the Palestinians since the early 1930s (after Jewish immigration to Palestine intensified) and increasingly after 1948 departed, were forced to leave or exiled and, especially after the war of 1967, were turned into refugees in one Arab country or another. The “interior” also marks a difference, geographically and politically, from the “outside” or “exterior” [*Al-kharij*]; it is the place where Palestinians stayed, despite their political and material dispossession, symbolizing and actualizing Palestinian resistance. The “inside” is a sign of steadfastness [*sumud*], to use Raja Shehadeh’s term (“The Third Way”), and of not succumbing to the

pressure of the occupation: “[h]ere we are, unmoved by your power’ (“After the Last Sky” 68).

But this construction is, as Said admits, an “outside” or “exilic” construction of the “inside,” one prompted by physical distance, material disassociation, and perhaps nostalgia, to idealize and privilege an uncorrupted “inside” of Palestinian internal fortitude (84). From the “inside” point of view, the picture is endlessly complicated by factors which to Palestinians from the “outside” seem altogether distant or incomprehensible. These spatially reckoned points of view open Khalifeh’s 1976 novel *Wild Thorns*⁴ and sustain a heightened level of tension in its narrative construction of events. When Usama, for instance, returns in the opening scene of the novel to his mother’s house in Nablus, committed to staying and taking up struggle “inside” the territories, it is the distance of his perspective from that of everybody else there that strikes the reader. Only a few hours after he crosses the borders separating Jordan from the West Bank, Usama readily denounces people’s acquiescence and submissiveness to the Israelis. He is struck by fellow Palestinians in the car bringing him back to his mother’s house smoking Israeli cigarettes and speaking matter-of-factly of the rising cost of Israeli-produced rice and sugar; he is again outraged by a Palestinian woman in the car calling an Israeli soldier “Effendi” while imploring him to forgo the ten dinars customs’ fee he insists she has to pay, but which she does not have, on items she brought home with her from Jordan:

Effendi! Effendi!’ she calls him!’ Our friend’s hand almost reached out to slap the woman’s black-covered head. ‘How can you use that word? And why the tears, woman? Ten dinars aren’t worth a single tear at their customs counter.

Save your tears for what will happen after the disaster and the setback. Save

⁴ Subsequent reference to *Wild Thorns* will be *W.T.*

them for the disintegration awaiting us as long as there are people like you around. (*W.T.* 18)

In this, as in many of the other incidents through which Usama's character is sketched out for the reader, Usama's reaction is caught up in a fundamentally monologic form of consciousness: that of anti-Israeli violent struggle. Usama's resolve, based on his own frustrated exile and now disappointed return, is that violence alone can properly redress the oppression of occupation and the complicity of the Palestinians "inside." This unmediated idea of national struggle necessitates not only that he reject offhand what he recognizes as the people's weaknesses and passive acceptance of the status quo of the occupation, but that he denounce, equally vehemently, the signs of his own weakness and vulnerability. In an internal monologue a few moments after his reunion with 'his' land, Usama reflects:

Yes, when will those tender feelings living forever inside me cease to be? This constant longing for the unknown, the feeling of melancholy that overwhelms me whenever I hear a song or smell a flower, the lift in my spirit during sun set with no limit! The yearning and nostalgia for this ever green land, its very soil, so rich and so blessed! A romantic, right? No way! Not since the training, the shooting, the crawling on all fours; such things make a man unromantic in thought and deed. That's the logic of it. That's the equation. (*WT* 9)

Meanwhile, Usama is able to live the force of his 'idea' of violent resistance only to the extent that he, as an individual, lives and instantiates a "systematically monologic context." A monologic way of cognition, Bakhtin writes, "arises only where consciousness is placed above existence, and where the unity of existence is transformed into the unity of consciousness." In other words, the force of Usama's singular 'idea' is possible precisely

because he does not live and share what Bakhtin has called “empirical human consciousnesses”-the struggles and oppressions of people in the “inside” (81). He gains the singularity of his response by ignoring the realities of his people, like the woman confronted with the Israeli soldier at the customs checkpoint.

After this monologue, and in the process of narrating the characters’ everyday life, histories, *Wild Thorns* allows the ‘realities’ of Palestinian life “inside” to speak for themselves. Once starting to unfold, these realities quickly reflect the contradictions between Usama’s idea of national struggle, a monolithic political will imposed from the “outside”, representing the position of the Palestinian leadership, and the multiple forms of struggle of the Palestinians “inside” which have been rendered, due to both the oppression of occupation and the persistently oppressive ideologies within Palestinian life. What the reader encounters therefore are two intertwined levels of narration which synthesize the novel’s radical impetus. At one level, the narrative inscribes the novel in the ‘real-life content’ of its determining chronotopes, namely the spatial and economic realities of the decades following Israel’s occupation of the territories. Yet, simultaneously, the narrative rearranges the conventional meaning of these spatial and economic realities so as to effect political implications subversive of Usama’s master narrative of violent struggle. Through this two-fold method of narration Khalifeh places the nationalist ideology in a dialogic relation with the ‘facts’ on the ground-the result of this irreconcilable dialogue between the “inside” and the “outside” of Palestinian reality is reflected in the irresolution of the narrative itself, especially as seen by Usama.

The following passage, which registers Usama’s first impressions of the changes overcoming his friends and relatives after his return to his mother’s house, serves as an

example of this narrating process and portends the author's own unconventional vision of Palestinian national struggle:

The hardship of life doesn't show on people. They dress smartly. Walk faster. And buy without haggling. Money is aplenty and so is work. Wages are higher and people can now afford to buy meat, vegetables and fruits . . . They eat vigorously and stuff their children. He who owned no shirt before now flaunts leather jackets. And he who could not afford to buy a scarf now warms his ears with fur collars. Whiskers have grown longer, and skirts shorter. The hips of maids have grown fat after they've become workers and clerks. Something has changed here! The occupation is still there, and so is people's crushed dignity, but something has changed. Maids ceased to be maids and the class ladder is less vertical. People are stuffed, all people. (WT 26-7)

What has "changed" (for all but Usama) is the spatial and economic status of both the West Bank and Gaza since the occupation of June 1967—an issue which *Wild Thorns* raises as the anchor of its narrative representation of the transformation in Palestinian everyday life. Spatially, the two territories since then have become 'part' of an expanding and militarized Israel. Economically, this occupation has brought the territories from complete "economic isolation from Israel" to a state in which connection with the Israeli state has become the "predominant external economic contact" (Arkadie 105)

One of the most salient effects of this spatial-economic transformation, many analysts have argued, has been the isolation of the territories from their earlier ties with Egypt and Jordan and the creation of their dependency on Israeli economy. This happened, Salim Tamari argues in a recent essay, during the first two decades of the occupation:

During the initial period of Israeli rule (up to 1988) the demand for unskilled wage labour in Israeli industries . . . transformed the whole relationship between family expectations, children's education and the demand of the labour market. Whole village communities, as well as refugee camps, became completely dependent for their survival on employment in Israel. . . .(*The Palestinian Movement* 5-7)

"The shift lies," Tamari adds, "in the conscious and systematic method the Israelis undertook to subordinate the economy of the two regions to the needs of the Israeli state, and more significantly-in the appropriation of public land (and substantial private property) to serve the needs of the Jewish Settlement Councils in the occupied territories" (7).

But Khalifeh's narrative does not simply recount the socio-economic 'facts' which Salim Tamari describes above in sociological terms. Rather, her narrative elevates these 'facts' to the level of an ideological force and imposes, as all narratives do, a specific morality on them, as Hayden White views. What Tamari describes as "dependence" and "subordination" of the economies of the West Bank and Gaza to the needs of the Israeli economy, becomes in Khalifeh's narrative manipulation a form of relative independence for traditionally underprivileged groups of Palestinians, as reflected in the material well-being of people that shocks Usama. The tone of the preceding passage from the novel implies that the transformations in the economies of the territories in terms of their dependence on the Israeli capitalist job market have not been that detrimental for all Palestinians living there, since they have enabled, Khalifeh clearly suggests, some social mobility previously not available to the Palestinian masses.

Khalifeh is quite aware elsewhere in the novel that powerful forces and interests have operated in favor of Israel through the job market because of the sheer size of wage differentials and that the subjection of Palestinian workers to the law of the capitalist job market is not an act of Israeli benevolence. Indeed, in a scene which describes the Israeli factories, for instance, Khalifeh is blunt about the exploitative dynamics of Israeli capitalist economy which operates, albeit in varying degrees, on both Palestinian and Israeli workers. Both Zuhdi and Adil—who work in the factories and who are made to be the only pragmatic and ‘reliable’ characters of the novel—realize that their labour in Israel will not lead to greater ‘integration’ between the Israelis and the Palestinians—that the economic benefits reaped by their labours and that of their fellow Israeli workers, like Shlomo, are not ‘mutually beneficial’ as long as “they are controlled by the Israeli capitalist bourgeoisie and its military apparatus” (Siddiq “The Fiction” 148).

3.2.5 The National Struggles Vs. the Economic Situation

Yet, while Khalifeh’s critique of capitalist exploitation across national boundaries is integral to the social message in *Wild Thorns*, a more important critique emerges at another level in the narrative. The main issue for Khalifeh is that, through the process of what might be called forced modernization to which the territories have been subjected since their occupation in 1967, new social and economic identities have been forged on the scene of political struggle, challenging the cohesiveness and homogeneity of the anti-Israeli narrative of struggle. As a result of this process, the impoverished peasants who used to work on the land have become relatively prosperous as wage labourers in Israel. The hitherto weak and dispossessed workers whom Palestinian business owners hired for menial tasks now have

more stable jobs and a new consciousness of themselves, while the traditionally privileged land and business owners have gradually receded in importance, their authority superseded. What Khalifeh's narrative seems to stress (and this is where her view of the Palestinian situation poses radical challenges to the nation-revolution narrative) is that if the identities of these emerging social groups are no longer compatible with the nationalist ideology imposed from the "outside," this is precisely because this ideology has not articulated the needs and interests of these impoverished groups into its narrative vision. This is where Usama's idea of struggle is rendered futile. This critique-which chooses to unravel internal Palestinian inequities instead of simply identifying an external national enemy for the Palestinians' misfortunes, thus earning Khalifeh considerable rebuke even from leftist Palestinian critics like Emil Habibi, a member of the Israeli Communist Party, who viewed that Khalifeh in her novel has elevated the issue of Palestinian workers' rights and relative autonomy in Israel over the "primary issue" of the occupation of Palestinian land (174). This rebuke is specifically manifested in her treatment of the kind of labour relations and property possession in the territories themselves.

Many examples illustrate this point in the novel. For example, Zuhdi tries his hands on anything he could get in the territories working as a mechanic, a taxi driver, and a construction worker, then becomes an exile in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Germany, before eventually coming back to become a *lishka* (legal) worker, in Israel. He points out to Usama that Palestinian business owners were not more 'merciful' to him than his present Israeli bosses. Zuhdi's sentiment against members of the Palestinian bourgeoisie is not a unique instance in the novel. Indeed, both Zuhdi and Abu Sabir, who belong to different generations,

make statements to the effect that their work in Israel has vindicated the humiliation to which their Palestinian ex-bosses had subjected them.

This is not to say that Khalifeh wants to exonerate Israel's exploitation of the Palestinians. Her narrative, rather, suggests that class inequities among the Palestinians cannot be reduced to a colonizer-colonized dichotomy; that Palestinian oppressions and failures cannot be vindicated by a monolithic national struggle; and that people's real, material choices defy nationalist identifications, even when their individual choices are referred at one point or another to the nationalist ideology. In another passage characteristic of this aporia, Zuhdi reveals stories of his oppression by fellow Palestinians while ironically narrating to Usama the story of Abu Sabir who had been denied medical treatment in Israel after a factory incident because he was not a *lishka* worker. "Had he been a *lishka* worker," Zuhdi explains to Usama, "he would have gotten his compensation. . . . They denied him treatment, believe it or not, because he was not a *lishka* worker. He wanted to avoid taxes: social security we [palestinians] don't really get, union fees and national security" (WT 77-9). Here, Abu Sabir's predicament is not that "he was illegally hired by an Israeli firm that does not provide its workers with accident insurance," as Suha Sabbagh has read it in her analysis of the novel (71). Rather, as a Palestinian sucked into the capitalist job market of his colonizers which gives him relatively good wages and autonomy, but forces him to 'contribute' to its army revenues, Abu Sabir declines paying social and national security taxes to the enemy state and ends up losing his health insurance in the process. The irony is precisely that Israel's health policy does protect Palestinian workers even when their "national security" revenues go to annex more Palestinian land. As Zuhdi puts it: "the situation sucks but your wage is paid. They pull the land from under your feet and then call

you brother” (WT 79). So, even when Palestinian oppressions, like Abu Sabir’s, are “determined from without” (to use Fanon’s terms) by the colonizer-colonized binary identities, their articulations in specific locales of everyday life defy a facile reduction to nationalist lines.

Usama’s encounter with Abu Shehadeh, an aged Palestinian peasant who worked in Abu Adil’s farm along with his son Shehadeh, further demonstrates why employment in Israel has so quickly and so successfully superseded working on Palestinian land “inside.” In Khalifeh’s rendition, this success has more to do with the relationship of the Palestinian peasants to the Palestinian land in which they laboured, than with the Israeli job market *per se*, as Tamari’s analysis suggests. Khalifeh foreshadows this link--between the relationship of the Palestinian peasant to the land, on the one hand, and his employment in Israel, on the other--in a passage where Usama goes to visit his uncle’s farm:

His uncle’s [Abu Adil] farm was on the other side of the stream, hidden behind the white poplar and oleander. Usama was walking as he looked for the greens which used to cover the place, but the farms were deserted and the arboretum covered but occasional spots of the neglected land. (WT 39)

The impact of this employment on the Palestinian community is inscribed, literally, on the land itself, which appears barren and empty. Usama, to whom the neglected condition of the land seems incomprehensible and unjustifiable, demands an explanation from Abu Shehadeh who takes care of it: “Why doesn’t Shehadeh work on this farm?” Usama asks Abu Shehadeh. ““Over there is better, “the old man answers. ““Over there is a lot of money and fun. And none of this ‘come here s.o.b., go there pimp’ . . . No one is over his head, breaking his back, making him work morning and night, like a dog” (41).

For Abu Shehadeh and his son, then, both of whom were hired hands in the Palestinian land, work in Israel is simply changing old masters for new ones. Yet, as wage labourers in the Israeli economy, Palestinian workers are nonetheless eligible for more rights than before. But Usama, whose utter lack of touch with people's life in the "inside" is not only predicated upon his exilic perspective, but also negatively determined by his privileged class position within Palestinian society, is genuinely dismayed by Abu Shehadeh's answers:

And this farm, old man. You're leaving it for whom?'¹ The old man shook his head brushing a mosquito off his face as he resorted to well known idioms 'How would I know! 'I' who else would know, then? You don't know, the man who nourished every tree in this farm like you nourished your own son! . . . 'I' As if the land were really ours?' I 'Whose it then? . . . how would I know? 'I' . . . This land, whose is it sir, Haj, old man? Who does it belong to? 'I 'To its owners, Effendi, who do you think? And why are you angry at me? I am a hired hand here sir, and have always been. I have no land, nothing; my son is a hired hand too and will always be. And if the land is not mine or my son's, why should we die for it? When we were starving, you cared little for us. Now you care for what we do. Why? (41-2)

The land, then, is not an undifferentiated, abstract space which belongs to whoever lives on it. It is a piece of property belonging to the privileged Palestinian class, which has historically maintained possession and authority over it. In this instance, Usama's guileless questions to Abu Shehadeh are testimony to his political immaturity. His inability to differentiate the condition of his belonging to the land-as an Al-Karmi member and heir to his family's property-from that of Abu Shehadeh and his son, whose commitment to the land

is clearly necessitated by their economic need, also conditions his discourse of struggle as a political monologue of an unmediated, binary opposition of colonizer-colonized. There is little wonder, then, why he cannot understand how a Palestinian of Shehadeh's class could accept work in Israel over staying and working in the farm, now that the Israeli occupation has provided another economic resource for those who worked on the land and did not possess it.

To Usama, belonging to the land is a matter of timeless political commitment (hence, his nostalgia?), separable from what Marx has called "a definite mode of life," the material relation that connects people to the social space in which they live and produce their means of subsistence (Marx 150). Connection to the land is, as he reflects after a confrontation with Adil concerning Shehadeh's work in Israel, a matter of "loyalty, principle, and an ethical obligation," not an economic or material relation (*WT* 87). Shehadeh is the ultimate betrayer in Usama's eyes: he bought his success and prosperity in Israel at the expense of loyalty to the Palestinian land.

Usama's class-based identification with the land masquerading as "integrity" and an "ethical obligation" explains why the discourse of retrieving the land has been so essential to the ideology of nationalist struggle and why this discourse has not been critically tied into the issue of social class and familial legacy in the Palestinian national imaginary. When Usama appeals to "integrity" and "ideals" in defending the Palestinians' obligation to the land, he is not being disingenuous, nor is his commitment to violent struggle and self sacrifice for the sake of the Palestinian 'cause' simply false. Loyalty and patriarchy are here, as in any patriotic discourse, intertwined. Usama's ideals stem from and express an old and well-

sustained relation in Palestinian society between dignity, integrity and honour, on the one hand, and property and authority over the land, on the other.

This specifically patriarchal relation is, surprisingly, what even the most progressive Palestinian thinkers still stress in their discourse on Palestinian nationalism. When discussing the effect of land confiscation in the territories on the Palestinian community's national identity, which becomes crucial in the women's narrative of *Sunflower*, Salim Tamari writes that:

[i]n a predominantly agrarian society (or even in an urban society with persisting agrarian values) such as the one under examination, property in terms of land and housing underlies the community's national identity. The continued confiscation of Palestinian land by the military authorities is seen not as a loss of real estate, but as the alienation of national patrimony. (10-11)

It is precisely because the form of national identity which calls for national struggle rests on "land property" and "patrimony" that so many of the lower class Palestinians in *Wild Thorns* fail to identify with it. What is severed through work in Israel and Israel's policy of land expropriation and control is the Palestinian upper class and landed aristocracy property rights. Usama's quest for an ethical obligation to the land is predicated upon his image of the land as a guarantor of his own identity, whose meaning and continuity stems from his legacy over, and continued entitlement to, the land. This is where Tamari's statement about "the alienation of national patrimony" uncritically collapses nationalism and patrimony into a natural or assumed correspondence where it should be thought through and articulated on a class basis. For, as Khalifeh shows in *Wild Thorns*, legacy over the land or having a

birthright to the land, is preemptive of other Palestinians' rights to it: those who cannot claim a natural authority or continued legacy over the land.

Yet, having levelled her critique against Palestinian patriarchy and the notion of national struggle and national sovereignty which inheres in an uncritical connection to the land, Khalifeh keenly and ruthlessly investigates the ways in which the nationalist discourse is inevitable as a dynamic for Palestinian anti-colonial struggle. What Khalifeh does not want to relinquish is the multiplicity of voices and wills which do not combine or synthesize in a unitary voice of the author. She does not present a viable alternative to the nationalist vision, even when the discourse of the land seems alienating to the Palestinian peasants and workers and in fact secondary in terms of their material oppressions. Partly, this is because *Wild Thorns* is a realist novel. In terms of artistic or formal aspects, this means that the novel does not merely explore contradictory dynamics in the colonial situation, but rather its narrative as a whole is affected by their consequences.

Every movement in the narrative relies on a politically constructed metaphor: characters, dialogues, monologues, even the description of nature, are all embedded in a politically symbolic sphere of language. In other words, the novel manifests a number of ideological positions that do not themselves represent "individually accented wills" or temperaments, to use Bakhtin again, but are rather made to fulfil an ideological commitment based on its chronotopic elements. The rifts which Khalifeh presents between the "inside" and the "outside," the narrative of violent struggle and that of accommodation, the discourse of loyalty to the land and that of everyday strategies of survival, all seem to be inscribed on the subjectivity of the characters themselves as Khalifeh draws them. These characters are caught up in the national narrative even when their everyday choices assert an individual

strategy of survival and a will to self-interest. Every character in the novel, especially those who work in Israel, also recognizes him as part of a collective narrative of anti-Israeli, anti-colonial struggle. Even when Abu-Sabir's fingers get mangled by an Israeli machine and he is denied medical treatment by the Israelis, his suffering is immediately transferred onto a collective plane of struggle of his 'people.' His appeal for a heroic narrative from the Arab past to redeem his not-so-heroic present reveals, momentarily at least, his need to see his humiliation as part of a larger Arab history of struggle and suffering and not an individual or isolated event. The continuity in Abu Sabir's private and public forms of suffering, the fact that his personal injury is made to complement and radically echo that of his history at large, is testimony to the novel's 'allegorical level of representation' as Jameson views in her article "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism" (65).

Similarly, Adil's character instantiates a possible alternative to the binarism between Usama's grand narrative of struggle and the status quo of total deliverance. Adil's struggles are real and meaningful within the realm of available choices, in contrast to his cousin's ideational affirmation of struggle. He supports his father's kidney machine and his brother and sister's education by (secretly) working in an Israeli factory; becomes involved with the problems of Zuhdi and other Palestinian workers despite his privileged class background; fights Abu-Sabir's legal battle for compensation in the Israeli courts; identifies with an Israeli woman whose husband Usama stabs to death; feels solidarity with Shehadeh, who rebels against his Palestinian boss (Adil's own father), and; finally, survives Usama's bombs which kill Zuhdi and the Palestinians in the buses going to Israel when he misses work on the day of the attack to help Abu Sabir appeal an Israeli court decision denying him compensation. But Adil, too, is characterized in such a way so as to ultimately embody the Palestinian

individual's incapacity to transgress the objective structures which constitute a binarism of the colonial-national conflict. As he tells Zuhdi in their last conversation:

I fight despair with desperate strategies. Do you understand? I cannot understand this strange blend of feelings nor can I explain what I think. Odd and indeterminate thoughts go through my head, so I can't define my stance on things with any clarity. Peace! Brotherhood! . . . I'm still dreaming of the impossible. But can I make roses from thorns? Thorns don't grow roses, [Zuhdi answers] but they protect them. So, I go on dreaming. (WT 177)

Usama's final words are haunted with the world of international airports, borders, and countries of exile and negation, where the individual's identity and status quickly and unequivocally correspond to one's passport and nationhood. This is the social realm in which the individual's subjectivity is constructed for him in relation to the institution of the nation and national identification. It is also the realm in which, as Homi Bhabha has written, "an incommunicability . . . shapes the public moment; a psychic obscurity . . . is formative for public memory" ("The World" 143).

3.2.6 The Palestinians: Genderless Struggles

Both the novels considered here are set in Nablus, a major Palestinian city in the occupied West Bank. They narrate the different social and economic relations that ensued in the Palestinian communal space after it came under Israeli political and especially economic hegemony in 1967. Both novels are clearly directed towards the outside in the person of the colonizer as well as the inside in the person of the Palestinians, men and women. The colonial situation makes it particularly hard for women to criticize the nationalist narrative,

without taking the risk of being accused of betrayal. Therefore, the advancement of women in general, their integration in development, and their achievement of full equality cannot be realized until peace, freedom, and democracy prevail in Palestine. The need for these prerequisites for advancement is considered most urgent in the case of Palestinian women who still suffer the burdens and hardships of foreign occupation. However, the Palestinian woman's awareness and strength grows parallel to the increasing political turmoil and war that surrounds her. It is true that the creation of the state of Israel and the correlating Palestinian economic problem forced many Palestinian middle and middle-upper-class women like Sadia to become more self-reliant. All female characters in the two novels are stronger than they realize themselves to be. Sadia, after the death of her husband, ventured into the working world and found a job to support her family and build a house. She resisted becoming dependent on either her in-laws or her own family, and also rejected remarriage. Her awareness of women's inequality had thus solidified into action as an adult. She would no longer depend on a man to care for herself and her children; at the same time she engages herself in resisting the Israeli occupation. The two novels do not show a direct challenge to the central patriarchal system. Rather, in her 'feminist'/nationalist approach, Khalifeh seeks to incorporate the role of women into the national picture.

3.2.7 Conclusion

Thus, *Wild Thorn* and *Sunflower* depict the diverse nationalist agenda of struggle for national liberation and expose the tragedies of the Palestinians at home under occupation highlighting the desires of the Palestinians to return. They are realist that they do not idealize the nationalists, but shed light in every corner in the society with all its problems in attempts

to reevaluate and reform. Caught in the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Palestinian people, men and women, find themselves waging two wars at the same time, against the colonial presence on the one hand, and against the harsh economic and political conditions inside on the other. In Palestine, women's activism evolved directly out of nationalism, and the salience of foreign occupation made it impossible for gender transformation and 'feminist' identities to be disengaged from national self-determination and national identities.

3.3 Decolonizing the Algerian Mind(s): History, (neo)Colonialism, Nationalism, and Revolutionary Politics in Ahlam Mosteghanemi's *Dhakirat Al-Jasad* (1993) [Memory in the Flesh]

Ahlam Mosteghanemi is an Algerian sun which enlightens Arabic literature. She has carried Algerian literature to a stature which befits our national history. We are proud of her Arabic word as Algerians pride in their Arabness.

(Ahmad Ben Bella, "Ahlam" N. pag.)

The novel [Memory in the Flesh] got me dizzy, and I don't usually get dizzy because of a novel. The reason of that dizziness feeling was that the novel was so much like me; crazy, tensed, Intrusive, cruel, human, lustful, and against the law, just like me.

(Nizar Qabbani, "Mirror Mirror" 1)

A human being spends his first years learning how to speak, and the Arab regimes teach him silence for the rest of his life.

(Ahlam Mustaghanemi, *Memory in the Flesh* 15)

The Arab world can be divided into four regions, Mashriq [Levant], Maghrib [The Arab West; North Africa], Northeast Africa, and Arabian Peninsula. The Maghrib is a term used for the entire region of North Africa (the adjective form is Maghribi; Maghrib comes from Arabic and means “The Arab West” according to (Nydell 148). Four countries fall under the Arab West category: Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya. Therefore, to cover all the regions of the Arab world in this study, I have chosen Ahlam Mosteghanemi as a representative of the Arab women writers of Maghrib [Arab West; North Africa].

Ahlam Mosteghanemi’s novel *Memory in the Flesh* necessitates a brief overview of the Algerian history, its struggle against colonialism and the role of women in that struggle, the fate of Algeria after independence and the current status of the society.

3.3.1 Historical Context

Algeria is a revolutionary socialist state where Arabization is strongly emphasized, partly as a reaction to the Algerians’ experience with French colonization and their long, traumatic war. Independence was achieved in 1962, at a terrible cost – one million Algerians and 28,000 French dead. Despite the fact that Arabic is the official language of the country, French is still widely used, particularly for professional purposes. Both languages are taught in the schools, but only younger Algerians are truly comfortable with Standard (written) Arabic (Nydell 151-52).

In 1830, France occupied the cities of Algiers, Gran and Annab. This occupation led to resistance from important Algerian personalities such as Prince Abd- Al-Qadr, Ahmad Bey and Fatma N’Somer. The latter was an important female figure in the Algerian resistance. However, in 1847 France succeeded in suppressing the revolt by initiating a

campaign of pacification. The so-called “pacification” was brutal and destructive. To gain control over hostile areas, the French army destroyed villages and property.

The war had cost Algeria the lives of more than one million people and as many as two million people were left homeless. After the war, Algeria was a war-torn, impoverished nation. French colonization in Algeria left a disordered and baffled society. The colonization left behind Algerians who spoke French fluently, dressed like the French, ate French cuisine but who resented France. It left behind Algerians who favoured their Arabic and Islamic roots but could neither read the language nor relate to Arabic traditions. Thus, colonization created a society lost between two identities and two civilizations. After colonization, Algeria became the illegitimate daughter of France. It carried in its heart mixed feelings of nostalgia, hate, love and resentment. The complexity of the relationship between France and Algeria is better described by Malek Haddad, who said that France was “my exile” but also “my only arm of combat” (Gordon 53). This complex relationship can also be seen by the fact that it was not until 1975 that a French head-of-state, Valerie Giscard-d’Estaing, visited Algeria. On March 2, 2003, Jacques Chirac became the second French president to visit Algeria.

The independence for which Algerians fought so bitterly became a reality and the end of colonization was the beginning of a new era. However, it concealed an uncertain future. Algerians were eager to erase what was left of French colonization and to rediscover themselves and gather what was left of their broken identity. In 1962, Ahmad Ben Bella, the FLN leader was the most popular figure in Algeria. He was elected president of Algeria in an uncontested election in 1963. Ben Bella directed his country toward “Arab socialism.” Several years later Ben Bella became autocratic in his rule, arousing opposition. In 1965, Ben Bella was overthrown in a military coup by his defence minister Houari Boumedienne, who

suspended the constitution and designated himself as president of the country. In the beginning, Boumedienne faced some resistance from regional groups but later he gained the support of most Algerians. In 1978 Boumedienne died and was succeeded by FLN leader, Colonel Chadli Bendjedid. In the late 1980s, Algeria's economy came under severe strain and the country witnessed massive demonstrations against President Chadli Bendjedid. There were also riots by Berbers against legislation that made Arabic the only official language. At the same time a massive earthquake struck Algeria killing 45,000 people. Thus, Algeria entered a major recession in the late 1980s, which led to a long civil war taking away the dream of "New Algeria."

3.3.2 Algerian Women and Nationalism

However, since the end of the deadly civil war between radical Islamists and the government at the start of the new millennium, Algeria has been in a state of flux. There are more girls enrolled in high schools than boys, and almost 61 percent of university graduates are women. "Education is many women's only window on the outside world," explains journalist Zeinab Ben Zita. The more educated a woman is, the greater her likelihood of independence (qtd. in El Ahla n. pag.). In Algeria, women drive trains hold positions as judges and make up the majority of students. Nowhere else in the Arab world are equal rights for women taken so seriously as in Algeria. For example, women account for one third of the total workforce in present Algeria: they are there in academia, law, hospitals and government services, among other spheres. Algeria, in some ways, is reversing traditional gender stereotypes in the Arab world. However, there still are issues to be resolved, especially concerning social traditions and family laws, especially divorce and remarriage. They have

had the right to file for divorce since 2005, yet they still cannot marry without the permission and the signature of a male relative. Algerian family law still classes women as minors. Ait Zai comments, that “We are progressing towards a modern society, but this is not always apparent, because we are still caught up in the conflict between the traditional and the modern,” (qtd. in El Ahla n. pag.).

Just when it was believed that Algerian writers had exhausted the topic of the war of independence as well as the major issues of the immediate post-independence years, a new novel revived the subject with virulence and frankness. It was Ahlam Mosteghanemi’s first novel *Dhakirat Al-Jasad* [Memory in the Flesh] which rewrites the history from a new perspective (Bamia 85). Major themes such as the abuses of power and the betrayal of the revolutionary principles resurfaced occupying centre stage.

3.3.3 *Memory in the Flesh: The Text*

Memory in the Flesh (1993) is the first novel written by an Algerian woman in Arabic. It is dedicated to both the author’s father, who was a political leader in the national liberation struggle, and to her literary father, the Francophone Algerian poet and novelist, Malek Haddad (1927-78), who decided not to write in a language which is not his after the independence of Algeria in 1962, and ended up not writing at all. The novel was awarded the Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature in 1998 in recognition of its distinction.

The novel is narrated in the first person by the male protagonist Khalid, with frequent flashbacks. The protagonist knew *Hayat*⁵ or Ahlam, the heroine, when she was a child living in Tunis away from the war zone in Algeria. Entrusted once by Ahlam's father to him to

⁵ I use the names Hayat and Ahlam interchangeably as Hayat, the heroine of the novel, is writing a memoir in the form of the novel we read. Hayat in Arabic means ‘life’ while Ahlam means ‘dreams.’

complete the formalities for her civil registration, Khalid meets her again two decades later when she is a young woman adorned by traditional Algerian jewellery in the opening of an exhibit of his paintings in Paris. Her bracelet reminds him of his dead mother and the very identity of Hayat as the daughter of a militant martyr brings back to Khalid's mind the past of Algeria and the present disappointments. Hayat, on the other hand, meets in Khalid someone who knew so intimately her father -- whom she rarely met as he was involved in the clandestine struggle -- and could tell her about him and what he was like, going beyond the national icon that he has become in the eyes of his family and his country. This cross-referencing of father-daughter and son-mother relations gives the work a psychoanalytic dimension. The return of Khalid to Constantine to participate in the fabulous wedding of Hayat to a nouveau riche points to the frustrations of a lover and an artist as well as indicating the disappointing path taken by Algeria.

Each character in this novel is realistically portrayed, and at the same time seems to stand for a type encountered in the contemporary world. Hassan, Khalid's brother, presents an individualized case of demoralized Algerians who turn to religion for relief. Nasser, the heroine's brother, rejects the marriage of convenience between his sister and the successful businessman. The Palestinian poet Ziad, who taught in Algeria and comes to visit his old friend Khalid in Paris, meets Hayat and a mutual fascination between the younger writers takes place. This situation was disturbing the older Khalid, before he learns of the tragic death of Ziad in Lebanon during the Israeli invasion in 1982.

3.3.4 Exposing the Ravages of Colonialism

Memory in the Flesh is concerned with Algeria's struggle against foreign domination as well as its post independence struggle with itself and the fate of revolutionary ideals in a post revolutionary emerging nation. The story, spanning more than four decades of Algerian history, from the revolt of 1945 to the 1988, revolves around a love affair between Khalid, the middle-aged militant who turns to painting after losing his left arm in the struggle, and Hayat, the fiction writer and young daughter of his friend the freedom fighter Si Taher, all narrated through Khalid's voice. Ahlam Mosteghanemi exposes, with a postcolonial awareness, the disappointments, deviations and displacements of revolutionary ideals. However, she does not dwell on these social and political predicaments directly; she uses them as a narrative framework for the passionate affair between Khalid and Hayat. Hayat ends up marrying a character that embodies Algerian new bourgeois class, set on accumulating wealth and status symbols.

Ahlam Mosteghanemi's novel *Memory in the Flesh* embraces Algeria's past and present. It starts with the Algerian revolution in the 1940s and ends in 1988 with its eye on the future. In her novel, Mosteghanemi takes the reader on a trip through the ravages of colonialism and its consequences in Algeria. The complexity of her novel reflects the complexity of the Algerian experience during and after colonization. Through her work Mosteghanemi continues what her father started in the 1940s, namely the process of decolonization. According to Murad Mosteghanemi "the liberation of the land was the beginning of decolonization, not the end of it" (N. pag.). By writing in Arabic, Ahlam Mosteghanemi accomplishes another victory over the system of colonization. Her use of the Arabic language helps erase the barbarian marks of colonialism.

Mosteghanemi destroys one of the pillars of the system of colonialism, by allowing her protagonist, not the colonialists, to present Algeria's story. She rebels against the notion that "history is written by the victor", by giving the victim, Khalid, empty pages to tell his story. Thus, Mosteghanemi's novel is a rare phenomenon, where history is written from the point of view of the victim. Khalid, a former Algerian warrior, who lost his left arm in fighting the French in the 1940s, starts filling the empty pages with words full of grief and pain. He addresses his words to Ahlam, a young Algerian novelist and daughter of Si Tahir, a revolutionary leader. Khalid's memory takes him back to his childhood, when he first met Si Tahir. At the age of sixteen Khalid was arrested for participating in a demonstration. For six months he was placed in the same cell as Si Tahir where he developed a great admiration for him. Ten years later, three months after the death of his mother, Khalid joined Si Tahir in his armed struggle against French colonialism. He joined the front, leaving behind a brother and a father busy with his new young bride. Khalid discovered in Algeria his dead mother. His feelings of orphanhood were diminished and replaced by his love for another mother, Algeria. He was full of energy and dreams until two bullets from the colonial army found their way to his left arm. He was forced to leave the battlefield and his country to receive treatment in Tunisia. Before leaving to Tunis, Si Tahir asks Khalid to visit his family in Tunis and register Si Tahir's newborn daughter, giving her the name Ahlam, which means dreams. This mission given to him by his mentor gave him hope to live and survive the journey and the subsequent amputation of his left arm. He visits Si Tahir's family and registers his daughter in the civil records. Si Tahir dies a few years later in 1962.

The story jumps forward 20 years when Khalid fortuitously meets Ahlam at an exhibit of his famous paintings in Paris. At their first meeting, he is taken back by Ahlam's

traditional bracelet to memories of Algeria, his mother and his life when he was whole. This moment forms the beginning of an unrequited love story. Khalid's desire to recapture old Algeria through Ahlam proves fruitless. He is caught between memories of the past, a transformed present and an unknown future. He realizes that Ahlam represents a new Algeria with different values, those of materialism and western influence. Ahlam ends up marrying a wealthy Algerian businessman who represents the new Algerian bourgeoisie. Khalid reflects on the loss of his arm, the loss of his love and the loss of his country. The novel describes the ongoing impact of colonialism on Algerian society despite its liberation from France. The novel ends with Khalid going back to his country to raise his nephews after his brother died. He goes back to participate in building a new healthy society.

3.3.5 Colonization and the Question of Identity

Khalid said, "Art is everything that touches us, and not necessarily just everything we understand" (30). Indeed, this is what one experiences when reading Mosteghanemi's novel. Her art strongly shakes the feelings and makes our mind wonder without rest. We feel and sympathize with the characters of the story before you come to understand their secrets. To illustrate the complexity of colonization and decolonization, Mosteghanemi creates complex characters that embody within themselves many contradictions. The characters resemble Algeria with its wounds, pain and dilemmas. Like Algeria, the characters of the story are caught between the Arab-Islamic civilization and the French and Western legacy. Like Algeria, the characters have psychological and physical deformities.

At twenty-seven, the age during which most people are occupied with establishing themselves and starting a new family, Khalid had a part of his body amputated. Like Algeria,

Khalid's wound was deep and the bullets he received during his fight against colonialism perforated his left arm. Like Algeria, Khalid had no choice but to have his left arm amputated. Therefore, Khalid's amputated arm represents French colonialism that would have infected the whole body if it were not removed. Mosteghanemi shows the reader how amputating his left arm doesn't solve Khalid's problems. The physical amputation of his arm resolved his immediate physical problem, namely the risk of death from infection. Likewise the expulsion of the French troops from the country resolved the immediate physical presence of the colonizer and halted the erasure of Algerian identity and its replacement by French identity. The injury does not stop there. Khalid's scar is a physical deformity, as well as a psychological deformity with which he has to live, for the rest of his life. Throughout the novel, the author goes on to reveal the effects of this psychological scar on Khalid and Algeria. Mosteghanemi captures the impact of colonization on a country using the impact of an amputation on an individual. In this way, Mosteghanemi allows the reader to visualize and capture the reality of decolonization more clearly. After creating Khalid as a main character in her novel, Mosteghanemi gives him the authority to show the reader sketches of his psychological suffering as a handicapped person.

Immediately after his amputation, Khalid describes himself as being neither dead nor alive, only in pain. Likewise, the amputation of the French colonizer from Algeria, left Algeria with not only the physical scars of a country ravaged by war, and its economic impact, but also with a psychological scar in the form of an identity crisis, whereby Algeria and its citizens did not know who they were and where to begin. They were lost between being Arab and French. Most of them did not speak, read or write their own language. They lacked true independence and needed to build relations anew without the all-encompassing

presence of the colonizer. They needed to build institutions from scratch as all the former institutions were built and based on the relationship with the colonizer. Likewise, after amputation Khalid needed to build a different relationship with the world. He had to accept his new life with only one arm. As his doctor said: "I think losing your arm has caused you to have an unbalanced relationship with your environment. You've got to build a new bridge with the world through either painting or writing" (35). Shortly after his release from the hospital Khalid collides with the painful reality. He realizes the tragedy of his loss when he goes to visit Si Tahir's family and tries to hold Ahlam, who was six months old, "I was unable to catch you with my single shaky arm, to put you on my lap and play with you, without you slipping away from me" (73). This tragic scene captures the larger reality of being unable to embrace "New Algeria," which Ahlam represents. The loss of his arm forces Khalid to question, "What if you are a woman who can only be painted by the left hand, the one that is no longer mine?" (123) Here Khalid questions Algeria's ability to rebuild itself.

Throughout the novel, the author keeps the reader puzzled by Khalid's character. Is he proud of his scar or is he embarrassed by it? The author presents Khalid with his contradictory feelings about his scar and his country, which will be discussed later. This makes it difficult for the reader to understand Khalid. However, it also allows the reader to share Khalid's authentic dilemmas. Khalid's contradictory feelings toward his amputated arm come from the varied reactions he received about his disability. He says: "It is an awkward contradiction, to live in a country that recognizes your talents but rejects your injuries, to belong to a country that respects your injuries but refuses the person" (44). This creates Khalid's conflicting feelings toward his amputated arm. In Algeria Khalid's scar makes him a hero, while in France it bears no meaning. France recognizes Khalid as an individual and

respects his talent, while in Algeria the individual has no value. These conflicting feelings about his scar are transformed into conflicting feelings about France and Algeria later in the novel.

Decolonizing the Algerian/Arab Mind(s)

Let me hold in you all those whom I have loved. I look at you and recall Si Tahir's features in your smile and in the colour of your eyes. How beautiful it is for martyrs to return that way in your looks! How beautiful it is for my mother to return in the bracelet in your wrist, and for my homeland to return today in your presence! (*Memory in the Flesh* 40)

This is how Khalid perceived Ahlam when he first met her. He saw in her his lost homeland and his dead mother. Despite being in exile, Ahlam's presence brought him face to face with his country. She revived his dormant feelings about his past and his broken dreams for his country. Khalid, who had returned to his homeland from Tunis after independence, carrying with him lofty dreams about the future of his country, had been disappointed. He had returned with a desire to start a cultural revolution, to continue fighting for decolonization directed at the Algerian mind. Khalid wanted to liberate the Algerian mind, to throw out all the remains of colonialism and create a new identity. However, his dreams were thwarted when he found his people taking a different path to rebuilding their country, a path that invests in building factories and industries but doesn't invest in the development of the people. Khalid states:

There were changes in factories, farmers' villages, buildings, and big plantations, but human beings were being left to the last. . . All the industrial

revolutions in the world started within human beings themselves, and for the same reason Japan and Europe have become what they are today. But Arabs went on building big buildings and calling the walls a revolution. (97)

Khalid tried to survive in this corrupt atmosphere. He worked as head of press and publications in Algeria until he met Ziad, a Palestinian poet, who shook Khalid's conscience. Khalid whose job was to edit and censor dissident voices, asked Ziad to change parts of his anthology that vehemently attacked some Arab rulers. Ziad's adamant refusal made Khalid realize that he was participating in the corruption of the Algerian mind and not its liberation. Ziad's eyes "stopped at my missing arm for a second, and then looked at me in a humiliating way. 'Don't amputate my poems, sir. Give me back my poems and I'll get them published in Beirut'" (98). This humiliating gesture and the words that accompanied it shocked Khalid. "It made me feel like I was selling my people tins of food that were past their sell-by date. I felt somehow responsible for the corruption of their minds" (98). Thus, Ziad, with his intact values and ideals had revived Khalid's conscience. This would create a dilemma for Khalid in this corrupt environment. Khalid describes his dilemma as follows: "What would I do with that arrogant, stubborn man who concerned me and who refused to compromise his freedom? Did he have to live, and learn to sit on his principles and adapt to every shift in the wind? I had to choose in order to survive, and thus I chose" (99). Khalid chose exile. He chose to live away from his country rather than compromise his values and play a part in the corruption. He decided to bury his past with its dreams and leave to France, where he became a distinguished painter. However, in meeting Ahlam in Paris Khalid rediscovered his lost dreams. Ahlam with her Algerian features forced Khalid to remember the past he wanted to

forget. She brought back all of the past with its pain. In her eyes, he saw his city, Constantine, and decided not abandon her this time.

The author created a landscape, upon which she began a dialogue between the old Algerian generation, represented by Khalid and new Algerian generation represented by Ahlam. However, to Khalid, Ahlam was not only a representative of the new Algerian generation but was Algeria itself. The dialogue allowed them to discover their need for each other. “We were silently discovering that we complemented each other in an alarming way. I was the past that you did not know, and you were the present that had no memory” (64). According to Khalid, Ahlam was not an individual but a reflection of people he loved and a homeland he abandoned. He frequently referred to her as his homeland, “Bashful and confused, homeland sat by me” (53). For Khalid, Ahlam was similar to his city Constantine. Both of them carry two names and more than one date of birth. Constantine’s other name is Cirta and Ahlam’s other name is Hayat meaning “life”. Ahlam was named Hayat while she was waiting for her father to give her a name and register her. Like Constantine, which was given different birth dates every time it was liberated from foreign troops; Ahlam had two different birth dates. One reflects the actual date of her birth and the other when she was registered. Both Ahlam and Constantine carry the name of Tahir Abd Al Mawlla. Constantine carries it as one of its streets and Ahlam as her last name. To Khalid, even Constantine’s curves and bends look like Ahlam’s body. Thus, Khalid believed that by placing Ahlam on his path, fate had given him another chance to reclaim all that he had lost. Ahlam on the other hand, saw in Khalid her father who was stolen from her during her first years. Ahlam was searching for a past taken from her with the death of her father. Like Khalid, Ahlam was a victim of colonialism:

Both of us were victims of the war. Destiny had placed us in its pitiless quern,
 and we emerged, each carrying a different wound. My wound was obvious
 and yours was hidden deep. They amputated my arm, and they amputated
 your childhood. They ripped off a limb of my body and snatched a father from
 your arms. We were the remnants of a war: two broken statues under clothes.
 (64)

Through Ahlam's character, the author affirms that colonialism didn't only deform the old generations but that its fire had reached the new generation and caused a deep scar. The new Algerian generation was indirectly affected by the system of colonialism. They were orphans of the past. They were detached from their past and their roots, leading to identity confusion, Westernization, and being lulled by the comforts of materialism. This is illustrated in Ahlam's name. Khalid breaks down her name into a four letter acronym, A for "*alam*" or pain, H for "*hirqa*" or burning, la for "*la*" or no and m for "*muta 'a*" or pleasure. Her name exactly describes the transitions that take place in the book. It begins with the pain of colonialism, moves to the burning of the revolution, then onto the "no" of caution against Westernization and finally to the pleasure of the bourgeois life. The young Algerian generation was left hanging without a connection to their roots. All that was left of their past were streets with the names of heroes. This can be applied to all Arab countries after colonialism. Riyadh Al Sulh in Lebanon, Saleh al Ali in Syria, and Ahmad Orabi in Egypt are all streets, named after revolutionary leaders who fought against colonialism. Arab regimes used the names of the leaders and forgot to use their ideas. They built streets with their names and forgot to create schools to teach their philosophies. Thus, like most of the young Arab generation today, Ahlam is suspended between ghosts of heroes from the past and corrupt

regimes of the present. She is suspended between the glory of the past embodied by her father's name and the viciousness of her present-day. Therefore, Ahlam had no examples to follow; all she inherited from the past were names and slogans. Ahlam resented her father:

The fact that father left me a big name doesn't mean a thing to me, because I've inherited misery with the weight of that name . . . I'd have preferred an ordinary childhood and an ordinary life to have had a father and a family like anybody else . . . (66)

Ahlam blamed her father for choosing to be the father of Algeria and forgetting that children are like the land, needing fathers to grow and build their identities. Ahlam grew up with a conflicting identity like everything around her. She was proud of her Arabic identity, "Arabic is the language of my heart . . . We write in the language in which we feel" (56). Ahlam was also proud of her Islamic identity, "Of course I fast. It's my way of defying this city, my way of communicating with my homeland and my past" (157). In addition to this pride about her past and her roots, we discover another part of Ahlam's identity that is detached from the past and more Western. Unlike Khalid, Ahlam was incapable of seeing the features of her country in her. She perceived herself as an individual only, unaware that she carries with her all of Algeria. Ahlam failed to understand how Khalid saw her and painted her as Constantine. She was even offended by this description of her, "You've got some of the crooked line of this city, the shape of its bridges, its pride, its dangers, its caves . . ." (109). Her reaction was as follows, "You're dreaming . . . How can you make a comparison between me and that bridge?" (109-110). Individualism had reached Ahlam's spirit and prevented her from seeing herself except as an individual. Ahlam resembles her country with its identity crisis that swings between the West and the East. This identity confusion is a

remnant of the impact of colonialism on the minds of individuals, which programmed the colonized to believe that Western culture is superior to theirs. This belief is still alive and well today. It is evident when one observes how the young Arab generation has substituted their traditional greeting السلام عليكم (peace be upon you) with “Hi”, which is a meaningless greeting according to the English dictionary. This belief in one’s relative inferiority, left by colonialism is translated into actions, actions that are prevalent in many Arab countries today, like favoring a job applicant because he or she was educated in the West, or using English or French phrases to feel superior to others around you. Therefore, colonialism has turned Arabs themselves into orientalist applying and propagating an inferiority complex and many aspects of orientalist discourse. Like many in her generation, Ahlam had the tendency to take off her Arabic-Islamic identity and put on a Western identity. This is illustrated by Khalid’s accusation: “What you wanted was, in the end, just to become another copy of Catherine, to become an ordinary painting with an obvious mood, and a face with lots of makeup that looked like her face . . .” (110). The identity crisis present in the young generation is pervasive, diverse and for the most part, a subconscious phenomenon. Khalid’s criticisms of Ahlam and her generation illustrate these points:

Khalid: Constantine came along with your looks, with your walk, and your accent and in the bracelet that you were wearing.

Ahlam: Ah you mean that miqias bracelet? Well it happens, I wear it for some occasions but its heavy and hurts my wrist.

Khalid: Memory is always heavy. My mother wore one for years on end and never complained of its weight. . . You belonged to a generation that found everything heavy to carry, and so swapped the old Arab dresses for modern

ones made of just one or two pieces of clothes. Your generation also cut down on old jewellery to wear lighter pieces that could be put on and taken off quickly. They summarized all history and memory in a couple of pages in the school textbooks, and only one or two names in Arabic poetry . . . We belong to nations that only wear their memory on occasions. (76)

The diversity of this identity confusion is illustrated in the fact that it applies to the way people dress, the influence on schools and school texts, and the influence on memory. Ahlam speaks about her bracelet and is unaware of the weight of her statements. Khalid's seething criticism of the amputation of history and memory that has taken place in this young generation is elicited by Ahlam's innocent yet weighty statement about the heaviness of her bracelet, a statement that illustrates the degree of her obliviousness about her past and its relationship to her present. Ahlam and her generation are cut off from their past. They carry some characteristics of their history and memory but like someone with dementia, there are many holes and the loss is pervasive. The holes occupy seemingly random portions of their memory and more importantly those who are disconnected from their memory lack the insight to be aware of their loss. Ahlam and her generation go along innocently unaware of their disconnection from the past. Khalid says:

You must realize that you will not understand anything of the past you are looking for, nor of the memory of the father you never knew, unless you understand the traditions of Constantine and adhere to them. We don't discover our memory by looking at a picture, postcard or even a painting like this one. We only discover it when we touch it, when we wear it and live by it. (77)

Khalid's solution for discovering one's memory is to live it rather than looking at a picture or a painting. He argues that understanding the traditions and adhering to them is necessary to understanding anything about our past. This statement implies a process of thinking about everything you do and why you do it. It does not preclude the inclusion of new Western ideas and practices but prescribes the understanding of one's traditions and practicing them prior to embarking blindly on simpler, more comfortable, actions. While preaching to Ahlam about memory, and history and the importance of living with Constantine and its traditions, Khalid had escaped from his past, and was hiding in exile.

The ability to forget is a gift that allows us to temporarily forget our own mortality, but also a double-edged sword that can detach us from our roots. On one extreme, we have the existentialist, with a limited ability to forget, who constantly contemplates his own death. On the other, we have the hedonist with a quick ability to forget, who lives in constant denial of his death. Khalid, although not a hedonist, abuses the gift of forgetting by trying to bury his past, and live in utter denial in the capital city of his former colonizer until he is vividly awakened by Ahlam. Human beings are endowed with the ability to temporarily forget their mortality, yet we are reminded that we have a tendency to abuse this forgetfulness. This warning is embedded in the Arabic word for human being *insan*, that is derived from the root word *nasa* which means to forget.

Therefore, Khalid and Ahlam are similar. They are both victims of colonialism, and both had unfulfilled dreams. Like Ahlam's, Khalid's dreams were also amputated:

You looked like me . . . I would prefer to have been an ordinary man with two hands doing ordinary, everyday things and not to have turned into genius with one arm [. . .] My dream was not to become a genius or a prophet, nor a

defiant and rejected artist. [. . .] My dream was to have a wife and children . . .
(67)

Khalid is suspended between two lives, Paris and Constantine. The author uses Khalid's paintings of bridges as a metaphor for his and Ahlam's suspension in between worlds. Khalid's painting of bridges is a subconscious expression of his suspension. His turmoil comes to a boil and surfaces from his subconscious after seeing and falling in love with Ahlam. He begins to paint more and more bridges.

As I painted those bridges, I thought I was painting you. But in fact, I was only painting myself. The bridge was simply an expression of my situation that is forever in suspense. I was unconsciously reflecting onto it my worries, my fears, my turmoil. (137)

3.2.7 Conclusion

Memory in the Flesh is not only a criticism of Western orientalist and colonialist policies, it is a criticism of the Arab response as well. It exposes the disunity, the placement of material self-interest over the interest of the nation, the collaboration against one's own people, the impact of colonialism on the fragmentation of Arab society and the role of women in attempting to rejoin the dismembered parts. It examines Arab culture from an Arabic perspective and gives an Arabic view of a Western orientalist perspective.

Mosteghanemi's novel addresses the impact of exile on the nation. She depicts the corruption and difficulties faced by those whose goal is to invest in the people of the next generation. Khalid describes Algeria in the aftermath of the expulsion of the French, as follows: "I was distressed to discover that not only were we lagging behind France and

Europe, we were lagging behind where we had been half a century earlier under colonialism” (196). She uses Khalid as an example of a war hero who chooses to escape to the capital city of his former colonizer rather than face the difficulties required to build a nation. In this depiction of exile, Mosteghanemi urges those in exile to return to their land in order to nourish the development of the coming generations many of whom are amputated from their past. This is vividly shown by Khalid’s realization at the end of the novel when he states: “We take the homeland as furniture for our exile. We forget when the homeland puts us down at its door, when, unaffected by our tears, it closes its heart against us without so much as a nod at our suitcases. We forget to ask who will take our place after we go” (185).

I agree with Ghazoul who finds that “though the novel *Dhakhirat Al-Jasad* [Memory in the Flesh] is specifically Algerian in its setting with the action moving between Paris and Constantine and occasionally Tunis, its significance could be felt anywhere in the Arab World or in the ‘Third World’” (“Memory and Desire” n. pag.). The prevailing political climate perpetuated by the regimes in the Arab world is described in *Memory in the Flesh*, “A human being spends his first years learning how to speak, and the Arab regimes teach him silence for the rest of his life” (15).

Mosteghanemi’s novel shows the fact that the Arab publics are fully aware that their leaders function primarily to perpetuate colonialism rather than serve their interest. Prior to his disillusionment, Khalid in *Memory in the Flesh* contributes to the neocolonialist system by working as head of press and publications in Algeria, censoring written material prior to its publication. When he realized this contribution, he said: “What prevents me, I ask myself, from exposing these foul and bloody political regimes, over whose crimes we kept silent” (99). Thus, Mosteghanemi’s novel is engaged in two levels of decolonization: it

reappropriates Algerian history and presents the ravages of colonialism from the point of view of its victims; and also she writes in the language of the victims with passion and mastery. It also reveals the presence of two opposite narratives. The Arab perspective is presented as reality while the Western orientalist perspective is a discourse with an agenda.

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Chapter Four

Border-Crossings: Inter-Cultural and Trans-National Dialogues to Bridge

Gaps Across Worlds

(Rajaa Al-Sanea, Diana Abu-Jaber, and Naomi Shihap Nye)

4.1 Emails from a Saudi Woman: Social Traditions, Modernization, and Globalization in Rajaa Al-Sanea's *Banat Al-Riyadh* [Girls of Riyadh] (2007)

It seemed to me, and to many other Saudis, that the Western world still perceives *us* either romantically, as the land of *Arabian Nights* and the land where bearded sheikhs sit in their tents surrounded by their beautiful harem women, or politically, as the land that gave birth to Bin Laden and other terrorists, the land where women are dressed in black from head to toe and where every house has its own oil well in the backyard! Therefore, I knew it would be very hard, maybe impossible, to change this cliché.

(Rajaa Al-Sanea, *Girls of Riyadh* vii)

We are living in the 21st century, and there are still traditions from the 19th century, and that's just insane. You have the Internet ... and freedom of speech. You have modern schools and modern hospitals. And everything around you is digital. And yet you have to go through all this pain when you want to get married. It is my obligation to try to fix things in Saudi. I'm not trying to fix the government or Islam. What I'm trying to fix is mentality, how people think. It's the traditions. These traditions, either (need to) loosen up or we should get rid of them.

(Rajaa Al-Sanea, Interview¹. 2007)

To narrate Saudi Arabia is a precarious venture. This space of the Gulf, containing the most sacred Islamic sites, activates specific attitudes and discourses. The Saudi society is always viewed as a space of taboos and prohibitions especially for women. Rightly or wrongly, Saudi women have become an emblem of human rights deficits in the Arab/Muslim world. Rajaa Al-Sanea in her bold and daring novel, *Girls of Riyadh* (2005) is voicing the Saudi women's freedom, power and identity providing a portrayal of the realities of the Saudi society in general.

4.1.1 The Historical and Cultural Context

Saudi Arabia is an Arab country situated in the region of the Arabian Peninsula that include the six Gulf countries and Yemen. As a political entity, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a collection of families and diverse ethnic and religious groups which were united through conquest by Abd al-Aziz Ibn Saud during the first quarter of the 20th century. The Saudi Arabian government is a religious monarchy whose laws are based on the laws of Islam. The status of women in Saudi is based superficially on Islamic beliefs, but in practice traditions and societal conventions are very important factors in determining the role of Saudi women. Saudi Arabian women have considerably more freedom than women in some other Islamic countries in matters of education, employment, and business. On the other hand, they have fewer civil rights than men. Women in Saudi Arabia have been, by law, banned from driving since 1990, an act which is related to politics and traditions rather than to religion.

¹ Rajaa Al-Sanea. Interview. 08 July 2007 (n. pag.). 25 Feb. 2009
<<http://www.ordoesitexplode.com/me/2007/07/interview-with-.html>>.

The prohibition of women from driving cars was customary until the driving demonstration in November 1990 when forty-seven veiled Saudi women drove their cars on King Abdul Aziz Highway in Riyadh. Those who participated in the demonstration, and the husbands of those who participated, were punished by having their passports confiscated and those employed as teachers were suspended from their jobs. According to Eleanor Doumato, some of those who participated were subsequently harassed by phone callers, accusing the women of being agents for Western vice (“Gender” 31). This incident gained political significance partly because of the timing, in the midst of the Gulf War. It also received negative reactions from the people whose attitudes and beliefs are sometimes more conservative than those of the government. Yet it remains one of the most daring acts of defiance by Saudi women.

Regarding the issue of veil in Saudi Arabia, Rajaa Al-Sanea, the author of *Banat Al-Riyadh* (2005) translated into *Girls of Riyadh* (2007), asserts in her own words that “Aside from the morals and the Islamic teachings, I didn't have any restrictions. I was brought up by a liberal family. They didn't force me to wear the *hijab*. I started wearing it two years ago by personal choice because I wanted to do it for God” (El Okeily “Asharq Al-Awsat” n. pag.). When abroad many Saudi women do not veil since, as they put it, “it would attract more attention than modesty” (Yamani “Some Obseervations” 271). One can argue further that if many Saudi women wear the veil to strengthen their sense of identity and belonging, they may also do so to avoid getting into confrontations with conservative religious scholars and members of The Committee of Morals and Virtue. It is true that wearing the veil has different meaning for Saudi women according to their social class, tribal, religious, or regional affiliations. Regardless of the veil issue, women in the main cities of Saudi do not have much

freedom of movement that they can not walk on the streets unaccompanied by a male relative known as *mahram*. The policy of the Saudi State denies women from the right to travel without the permission of a *mahram*, a male guardian.

Arranged marriages, which form a major theme in *Girls of Riyadh* are still a phenomenon in Saudi Arabia due to social class consideration rather than gender discrimination or Islamic teachings. In some cases, the parents of the prospective bride and groom will arrange a meeting between the man, his father, and the prospective bride's father. Neither the man nor the woman will have seen each other before this time. The intended bride will make a brief appearance, perhaps to offer the men something to drink. If both the prospective bride and groom agree to the marriage after this brief meeting, a wedding date is set. However, most Saudi Arabian women are free to voice their opinions about their intended husbands. Before a marriage, the woman may write down specific terms. The terms may regard property rights, child custody, or divorce. Marriage, a social and religious contract, is threatened by the possibility of separation or polygamy. The result of the parents choosing wives or husbands for their sons or daughters according to social considerations reflects itself in divorce which is fairly common in Saudi Arabia. In 2001, Saudi courts granted an average of 25 to 35 divorces a day. According to *Gulfnews* report by Mariam Al Hakeem in 2008, nearly 62 per cent of marriages in the western region end in divorce, with a large percentage of those being less than 25 years of age ("Saudi Shura" n. pag.).

Most positions held by women in both the public and the private sectors are still meagre in Saudi Arabia. Saudi women are allowed to work outside the home in jobs that require minimum interaction with men. Therefore, most job opportunities for women are in health care, education or business. A few women hold high positions in companies.

However, whether at a hospital or at her private clinic she is required, when in front of men, to dress according to the prescribed code of dress. The male-female separation is still applied largely in many areas, including in professions which they are increasingly practicing, such as teaching both at girls' schools and in women's sections at the universities. They are also separated in some ministries where they work as social researchers and planners. The separation of the sexes can also be seen in separate branches of banks, and in women's shops.

Despite the restrictions, one can notice the increasing number of women in business. In all the big malls and commercial centres there are shops exclusively owned, run, patronized and staffed by women. Yamani observes that these women are not necessarily women with higher education but they have basic schooling, (277). The sort of businesses Saudi women own or manage are mostly geared or related to women's needs: boutiques selling women's clothes and accessories, beauty salons, among others. However, some enterprising Saudi women are venturing outside this field, engaging in import/export businesses or even manufacturing.

The education system in Saudi Arabia has undergone changes but it has always remained separate for men and women. In education, girls make up almost half of the students in Saudi Arabia's schools and universities (Yamani 268). Since the end of the 1970s until the present the trend among the more wealthy families has been to send their children, sons and daughters, to study abroad, mostly to other Arab countries and to Europe or the United States. Women belonging to the wealthier social strata during this period pursued higher education and several women obtained university degrees from foreign universities (269). Rajaa Al-Sanea, whose novel is under discussion, is currently pursuing a master degree in oral sciences at the University of Illinois at Chicago's College of Dentistry.

Politically, Saudi women still have little political representation in the higher sphere of the government. Recently, women have shown a remarkable struggle for wider political participation, a demand which is belittled by the oppositional conservative Islamic groups. This has not prevented them from taking advantage of any area where room for manoeuvre for greater freedom and effectiveness is allowed. Since 1999 women have been allowed to attend meetings of the National Assembly. As a sign of empowering women, in 2009 the Saudi government has appointed a woman as a vice-minister of education to be the first woman to reach such political position in Saudi Arabia.

The discussion of the novel *Banat Al-Riyadh* [Girls of Riyadh] can reveal more about the status of Saudi women and the Saudi society at large with all its diversity and contradictions. The novel involves themes related to love, gender roles, social class, religion, politics, globalization and Inter-cultural negotiation. In Al-Sanea's *Girls of Riyadh* the Saudi/Arab traditional values are negotiated and inter-cultural negotiation and understanding is called upon.

Girls of Riyadh: The Text

Rajaa Al-Sanea's *Girls of Riyadh* (2005) is structured as a series of emails sent anonymously by one of the young women. The unknown girl [the narrator] in her early twenties sends weekly e-mails from her internet group to the subscribers. The narrator reveals details about the lives of her four close female friends--who have been friends since schooldays; Lamees, Qamrah, Sadeem, and the half American Mashael². These four central characters of the novel are attractive female university students in their early 20s,

² Mashael is the Arabic name of Michelle. She is a Saudi girl of an American mother. The name is used interchangeably by the author and in this study as well.

fashionable, bright and from the middle-upper class Saudi Arabian families. The story follows their lives for twelve months as each wonders if she can find true love on her own or must settle for a traditional marriage arranged by her family.

Each one of the four girls goes into her own failures except Lamees who succeeds in both her professional career and her love life. Sadeem is engaged to Waleed, but their marriage is never fulfilled. He divorces her because of permitting him to “cross the line” before the marriage is finalized. Sadeem also experiences a second, much deeper disappointment before settling for someone who loves her more than she loves him. Qamrah, married to Rashid, can not understand his coldness toward her until she discovers that he has had a lover all along, a Japanese girlfriend whom he can not marry. Qamrah also ends up divorced, and pregnant. Michelle falls in love with Faisal, but his mother objects because of the low status of Michelle being of an American mother, therefore, their love story can never lead to marriage. To take revenge, Michelle attends Faisal wedding to show that she is more beautiful than the bride Lamees gets involved with her Shiite friend's brother, until the Police of Morals and Virtue catch them. These four middle-upper class girls enjoy expensive cars, first-class flights, spend summer vacations in Western countries, and use all the tools of modern technology, but still subject to arranged marriages, where strict tradition holds sway. Lamees succeeds in making a love match, she gets married to a man of her choosing and goes with him later to Canada to pursue her Boards in Medicine..

The emails as the narrator forecasts in the novel stir the media especially popular newspapers in Saudi like *Al-Riyadh*, *Al-Watan* and *Al-Jazeera* which happened in real life after the novel was published in 2005. This kind of forecasting added reality and intrigue to the novel. Each email, chapter, in the novel starts with a verse from Quran, Hadith [saying by

the Prophet], a quotation of a well-known international thinker, a piece of poetry, or lyrics from a famous Arabic song that capture the idea of the chapter.

Girls of Riyadh represents the diversity and contradictions that exist in the Saudi society. It also portrays the clash between old Saudi social traditions and its modernization that started taking place in the 1980s. The novel deals with the themes of the models of arranged marriages that exist in Saudi, reflecting on the role of contemporary young men and young women struggling to change these old social traditions that victimize men and women alike. More importantly, *Girls of Riyadh* renegotiates a space for Saudi women.

4.1.3 Breaking the Silence: A Critique of the Social Traditions

It is not as it may seem for some people that the author of *Girls of Riyadh*³ is rejecting or blaming Islam. In the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia the current social circumstances of the country have caused an identifiable strand of Saudi women to make of Islam the vehicle for demanding their denied rights. They have, in an alluring way, sought their sense of power, their sense of identity, their freedom, and their equality with men through the basic precepts of Islam. The novel opens with a verse of Quran which encourages people to change their realities if they dream for a better life: “Verily, Allah does not change a people’s condition until they change what is in themselves.” Quran, The Chapter of Thunder, Verse 11” (9, in the Arabic version).

In writing *Girls of Riyadh*, Al-Sanea benefits from her knowledge of the Islamic teachings to show how the social traditions practiced in Saudi Arabia contradicts the religious instructions. In an interview with the author—“Placing the blame on socio-cultural traditions,” she asserts:

³ In the following I will refer to *Girls of Riyadh* as *GOR*

In fact, I aspire to be the first to signal the beginning of change. These are social changes that are not connected to religion. This is why I am not anxious about discussing them through my writings. Silence is evil. I hate negativity and refuse to wait for others to act on my behalf. It is my duty to myself and to my children in the future. I fear I will mellow out with age and lose my motivation and courage, as has happened with others. (El Okeily n. pag.)

It could even be argued that Al-Sanea has manipulated Islamic concepts to the advantage of women, rather than having recourse to stratagems more familiar in the experience of what may be crudely defined as Western feminism. This is partly because those who have tried to move forward along a Western style liberal strategy, mostly in the shape of acts of defiance against the Saudi authorities have not seemed to achieve any serious practical results (Yamani 263). In Al-Sanea's note to the English version of the novel, she writes "I hope you will see, too, that little by little some of these women are beginning to carve out their own way—not the Western way, but one that keeps what is good about values of our religion and culture, while allowing to reform" (*GOR* viii).

A close reading of the novel reveals that the novel is a social critique of the traditions in Saudi society which deny women to have equal space in the society in matters of civil, social and legal status. In the first chapter Al-Sanea is placing the blame on social traditions that victimize women in Saudi Arabia:

I shall write of my girlfriends, for in each one's tale I see my story and self prevail, a tragedy my own life speaks. I shall write of my girlfriends, of inmates' lives sucked dry by jail, and magazine pages that consume women's time, and of the doors that fail to open. Of desires salin in their cardles I'll

write, of the vast great cell, black walls of travail, of thousands, thousands of martyrs, all female, buried stripped of their names in the graveyard of traditions. (3)

Towards the end of the novel, in the last chapter, the author emphasizes that both men and women are victims of the traditions:

As for love, it still might always struggle to come out into the light of day in Saudi Arabia. You can sense that in the sighs of board men sitting alone at cafes, in the shinning eyes of veiled women walking down the streets, in the phone lines that spring to life after midnight, and in the heartbroken songs and poems, too numerous to count, written by the victims of love unsanctioned by family, by tradition, by the city: Riyadh.” (*GOR* 300)

Focusing on the opinions, situations and beliefs of women in Saudi society, the novel exposes a section of society previously hidden, because of culture, traditions and the manipulation of religion by the patriarchal society. Perhaps young men will flock to the novel in an attempt to discover details they ignore about their female compatriots. Al Kusaibi said, “When the curtain is removed, the scene is exposed to us with all its funny and sad elements, with all the details unknown to those outside this enchanted world” (qtd. in El Okeily n. pag.). Milson argues that “a novelist generally describes the social environment familiar to him/her, and he/she does not have to describe every economic problem or every social problem” (n. pag.). Some criticized Naguib Mahfouz at the time for not describing the lives of the *fellaheen* [farmers]. Mahfouz replied: I grew up in Cairo and I describe the Cairo environment, especially the middle class. Thus, the criticism against Rajaa Al-Sanea for generalizing her representation of Saudi women is rather unfair.

The novel is not representing the situation of all women in Riyadh as the novelist states that “In the interest of fairness, I have to make clear that the girls in the novel don’t represent all girls in Riyadh, but they do represent many of them” (vii-viii). This is might be due to the diversity in class, traditions and identities in the Saudi society. In this regard the author says:

In my view it [generalization] is acceptable because the novel discusses general issues and does not revolve around a single person. When one is examining such matters, it is obligatory to rely on generalizations. The novel does not feature an imaginary world but depicts reality as is. In everyday life, we admit that we generalize sometimes. For example, we say that the man from Hijaz is more expressive than his counterpart from Najd . Conversely, what is shameful for a young man in Riyadh is not necessarily considered disgraceful for someone from the Eastern Province, the Hijaz, or the North. It is a deep-rooted issue that predates this generation. (El Okeily n. pag.)

Though the novel is deeply respectful of Islam, Alsanea’s *Girls of Riyadh* represents acute criticism of the prevailing understandings of ideal gender relations in Saudi Arabia. Arranged marriages and its social sequences emerge as one of the major themes of Al-Sanea’s text. The novel opens with a traditional Saudi model of marriage. Rashid who did his bachelor and master degrees in America has come back to marry Qamrah whom he had not met before:

Before the wedding, Qamrah had seen Rashid only once, and that was on the day of the shoufa, the day set for the bridegroom’s lawful viewing of the bride-to-be. The traditions of her family did not permit the man seeking the

engagement to see the bride again before the contract-signing. Moreover, in this case there was no more than a two-week gap between the signing and the marriage celebration itself, and Qamrah's and Rashid's mothers agreed between themselves that Rashid would not see his bride during that time. (55-56)

This kind of forced arranged marriage soon turns out to be a nightmare for the new bride. Qamrah finds out that her husband is involved with a Japanese woman whom he is not allowed to marry. Already pregnant, Qamrah returns to her parents' house to live a life of misery after being divorced:

. . . the divorce papers were delivered to Qamrah's father two weeks after Qamrah landed in Riyadh, effectively blocking all possible maternal machinations. It appeared as though Rashid had just been waiting for the moment in which he felt he could justifiably rid himself of the wife that had been imposed on him. (106)

Girls of Riyadh depicts the agony and suffering that a divorced woman can experience in a society like Saudi Arabia, where:

Qamrah suffered a great deal of pain as a result of her divorce....Nights were the worst: Since returning to the family home, she had been unable to sleep for more than three hours a night—she, who had never found it hard to sleep ten—or twenty—hours at a stretch before her marriage. (108)

It is the mothers and fathers who choose the wife for the son, or the husband for the daughter on the basis of social position of the family in the society and the wealth they have. Mothers choose their son's future wives either through matchmakers or when they meet girls

in marriages or any other occasion of gatherings. Therefore, girls interested in marriages have to attract the attention of the mothers by showing good conduct so that they may have a chance to be chosen:

The strategy of yaaalla yaaalla, which means ‘get going, but just *baaarely*’, is the most foolproof path to quick marriage proposal in our conservative society. The idea is to be energetic and constrained at the same time. ‘And after that you can be as foolish as you want,’ according to Um Nuwayyir’s counsel. (6-7)

Sadeem’s story was not less tragic than that of Qamrah. This girl, who was raised by her father (her mother died soon after her birth), would lose her first love and the second one. She revenged both through her marriage to her cousin Tariq whom she never thought would marry despite his strong feelings towards her. Her first emotional tragedy was caused by her fiancé Walid who deserted her after they were officially married in papers for a few months and before their wedding party. She gave herself to him during one night considering that he was her husband officially despite that the wedding had not taken place yet. He disappeared after that night and never showed up again. He eventually sent her the divorce paper. It was a shock and she blamed herself as she did not wait till after the wedding party. Sadeem never told her family about that night and she collapsed emotionally onto herself. She believed the reason that Walid divorced her was that he thought she had previous sexual experiences:

All that she had the power to do was seek God’s forgiveness and send one prayer after another into the air, imploring that the despicable Waleed would not scandalize her by revealing why he had divorced her; that, having dumped her, he would not say anything that would drag her name through the mud.

‘Allah, shield me! Keep his evil from me! Allah, I have no one but you to come to, and you are the most knowledgeable of my condition. (67)

Mashaël as her real Arabic name or Michelle as her mother and friends used to call her was more realistic and more liberal. On the contrary to her friends, she relatively enjoyed more freedom. Michelle was born to a Saudi father and an American mother. Michelle felt in love with Faisal and found him the right person for her as he showed good qualities. The love lasted a year and when Michelle asked Faisal to marry her, he backed off since his mother refused to allow him to marry a girl not of the family choosing and on top of that born to an American mother:

Faisal’s mother gulped down her pills. She wept hot tears and she stroked his hair gently as she talked about her great hopes to marry her youngest son to the best of girls, to give him the best home there ever was, and the best car, pulls all-expenses-paid tickets to spend the best honeymoon ever. (102)

Michelle, half-American, sneaks away from her house disguised in men’s clothing so she can drive with her boyfriend to a shopping mall. For not being a “genuine” Saudi, Michelle cannot marry her boyfriend, son to a wealthy and noble family.

The novel also criticizes the contradictions in the behaviour of Saudi people. Though Michelle’s father is very liberal, he rejects her marriage to her cousin Matti due to religious differences:

Michelle discovered that the epidemic of contradictions in her country had got so out of control that it had even infected her parents. Her father, whom she had regarded as a rare symbol of the freedom of Saudi Arabia, had (himself!)

now smashed the pedestal she had put him on, thereby proving the truth of the proverb: anyone who lives with a people becomes one of them! (197)

I can argue that the meaning of this novel can be sensed in any other Arab country where traditions, class and culture determine the status of women and responsible for their low position in the society. Rajaa is praising Nizar Qabani, the women's poet, "Truth be told, though you are a man, you are indeed 'the women's poet' and if anyone does not like my saying so they can go and drink from the sea, in love nobody can resemble you" (GOR 3/12). The novelist explains later that Qabani wrote his poetry for women because his sister committed a suicide when the traditions rejected her rights from marrying the man she liked. It is clear that the situation of women in Syria, which is one of the most secular liberal Arab countries, is not much better than those of women in the Saudi society due to the social traditions in Arab society in large.

4.1.4 Defiance and Constraints: Saudis at Crossroads

Al-Sanea's *Girls of Riyadh* exposes the insider aspect of what goes on invisible to many who do not know the reality of the contemporary Saudi Society. The four friends presented different models of modern Saudi women who are struggling in a society that insists on putting the woman in the back seat. All these women in the novel are fighting to induce change and make significant difference.

The Saudi young men and women in *Girls of Riyadh* experience a clash between a national, rigorous socialization and the uncertainties and promises stemming from wider access to different cultural influences. While young Saudis like the author herself finds Islam as the unchallenged base of their identity, yet they increasingly show discomfort with a rigid

conception of gender roles based on social traditions rather than the true interpretation of Islam and were searching for a compromise between their personal expectations and the demands of family and nation.

In Saudi Arabia, hospitals are the only place in which men and women can work together. Lamees met Nizar in the hospital where both were doing their practical training in dentistry, they fell in love and got married later to become the happiest one in her life compared to her other three female friends, which means that the segregation of males and females in public is one of the reasons behind the failures of marriages in Saudi Arabia. In the graduation ceremony the girlfriends gathered for a dinner which was held to honour the graduates. In this ceremony the four girlfriends were present and the narrator commented that:

Lamees was the unchallenged star of the party with her expanding belly; the foetus was in the twenty-eighth week. Lamees's rosy cheeks and confident smile announced to her friends that hope still existed somewhere in this troubled business of life. Everything about her, on this graduation day, showed them that at least one of them was a young woman bursting with happiness. (291-2)

Al-Sanea's novel also deals with the most restricted taboos in the country such as homosexuality, premarital sex and the ill-treatment of the divorcees and social casts as in the cases of the homosexual Nuri, the lesbian Arwa, the divorced women Um Nuwayyir and Qamrah. Um Nowayyir was a Kuwaiti lady that was married to a Saudi who left her and her son after 15 years of marriage. She opened her house to the girls to meet when they could not find a place to meet. She became a friend to all of them, helped them in times of need and

worked sometimes with them. Um Nowayer was in her 39th year, a bald woman who was able to face her only son's problem with courage: "She [Um Nuwayyir] was well aware that even if showing signs of being homosexual might not be considered an illness in America, in Saudi Arabia it was an utter calamity, an illness worse than cancer" (132).

One more important theme that emerged out of this novel is the discrimination against the minority Shiite in Saudi Arabia. At one point in the novel Lamees had to sever her friendship with Fatimah due to religious differences. Fatimah was from the Shiites minority while Lamees belonged to the Sunnites majority. Lamees liked Fatimah's brother who was studying medicine at the same university, but the relation had to end abruptly after they were both caught in a café by the Police of Morals and Virtue as dating is not allowed in Saudi and is an offence punishable by law. Fatimah's brother suffered at the hands of the Moral Police and his suffering was compounded since he was a Shiites: "Lamees's had heard a policeman whispering into her father's ear that they had found the boy was a Shiite from Qatif and so his punishment would certainly be worse than hers" (151).

Thus, Al-Sanea implies that the development of the nation can not be achieved without love and tolerance. She suggests that technology and education remain useless if not translated into action that strengthen the Saudi society on the one hand, and build a connection of respect and understanding between the Saudi/Arab and Western societies on the other. In addition, the novel depicts the Saudi society as torn between tribal, national and religious identities on one hand, and the process of modernization on the other.

4.1.5 Globalization and Saudi Trans-National Identity

It is no longer possible for any contemporary society to live and develop in isolation from the influence of neighbours or “the global village”. It is trite to say that barriers in Saudi Arabia have broken down through the influence of the mass media, but this is nonetheless true for being so. It is true that informational culture and more specifically emails allowed the e-narrator to establish a communication between people within and outside Saudi Arabia exposing and negotiating on the local, national and (trans)national levels. She uses Internet as a vehicle in the novel to depict the impact of modern communication devices on the Saudi society in the past few decades. In the conservative Saudi society, the Internet, cell phones and Bluetooth can be as important, if not more crucial, than face-to-face communication. The narrator in *Girls of Riyadh* is a well enlightened 21st century young woman who lives in Saudi. She is intelligent, motivated, and knows exactly what she and her friends are missing, but yet not strong enough to face the whole society by exposing her true identity. The affinity between oral forms of narration and this new media writing—emails, the style of chat rooms, etc.,—is emphasized by the narrator who imagines herself sitting among her audiences and narrating (*GOR* 10). The e-narrator compares herself to an oral storyteller and sneers at censorship. She relates:

I have heard that the city of King Abdulaziz is trying to block the email sites through which I send my emails as a way of preventing corruption and evil. I know that most of you know thousands of ways to find these blocked sites (.....). I have not asked for more than a small space on the spider web so that I can sit down cross-legged and narrate to you. Have I blasphemed! (*GOR* 89)

The language of the Arabic version of the novel reflects the influence of technology and globalization on Saudi people. The novel is in colloquial Arabic combining several Saudi dialects, many other Arabic dialects, and English-Arabic. This signifies the modern world and particularly the crisis of identity in Saudi Arabia. The chatty language of the novel also reflects the limited and closed space given to women in Saudi Arabia. As critic Marilyn Booth observes *Banat al-Riyadh* [Girls of Riyadh] exemplifies a phenomenon happening across the Arab world. Young Arab authors are writing in new ways, using new languages, preferring cyberforms and hybrid languages associated with globalized, wired existences.

If *Banat al-Riyadh* [Girls of Riyadh] is the first Arabic novel to fully exploit an email listserv format, it is also bold in its use of not one but multiple vernaculars in addition to the array of issues it deals with. In my opinion, a separate and in-depth study should be devoted to explore all the themes in this novel as it represents a new phenomenon for Saudi women's self-representation.

4.1.6 Escalation and Difusion: The Saudi/Arab-Western Tension

While the Arabian culture of the Gulf draws attention because of the strategic interest in the area, women's literature, and narrative in particular, is virtually ignored, especially works translated into English. Aside from a few short stories in English translation, nothing of significance has appeared in foreign languages in terms of translation or literary criticism (Ben Driss 152), and this is part of the reason why non-speaking Arabic audiences know so little about the reality in Saudi Arabia. What we find in English is just the image of Saudi women as misrepresented by the Western writers or media such as in Jean P. Sasson's novel *Princess: A True Story of Life Behind the Veil in Saudi Arabia* (1993) which reinforces the

image of Saudi women and Arab women in general in the mind of the Western reader and meet the stereotyping depicted by media. Raja Al-Sanea's *Girls of Riyadh* comes up with a narrative that deserves attention. The writer narrates the gap between reality and expectations unveiling the veiled. She negotiates a meeting ground between a private space of her generation and an established public. Spelling out the personal, along with all the petty details of a domestic space is a tactical manoeuvre to question the politicized institution of the social traditions in an attempt to reform her society and correct the image of Saudi people and culture outside Saudi Arabia, especially in the West where Saudi women are dehumanized.

Against the above theoretical background it is worthy to mention that Saudi women are currently struggling to have more civil rights and put pressures on the government to give more space for women. It is true that at no time in the modern history of Saudi Arabia have women enjoyed more liberties than they do today. There are now prominent women physicians, professors, journalists, and business owners. In early 2008, the Saudi government responded to pressure from Saudi businesswomen who frequently travel by lifting the ban preventing single women from renting hotel rooms, and they have even talked about lifting the ban against female drivers by the end of the year. Increased freedom has now reached into family relations and marriage customs as well, but Western media, scholarship, and popular culture are blind to see the changes and positive aspects of Saudi society (Bahry n. pag.). Rajaa Al-sanea in *Girls of Riyadh* is trying to convey this message to the Westerners who still stereotype Saudi women as the illiterate, passive, and veiled harem explaining that she wants people to have a broader image of Saudi Arabia besides being a land of terrorism and the land where men beat up their wives, or where women cannot work or drive. The girls

of Riyadh are shown as intelligent girls who are just trying to live like any other girls anywhere (n. pag.).

Princess Loulwa Al-Faisal takes up the issue of dispelling the image of Saudi women as “downtrodden slaves to men”, an image prevalent in the West. She described the country’s transition from a culture of itinerant tribes, in which women play a central role, to a modern society (“Empowering Saudi Women” n. pag.). As a result of such efforts to the empowerment of women in Saudi, King Abdullah appointed a woman as a vice-Minister of Education on 14 Feb. 2009, the first time for a Saudi woman to hold such a position in the Saudi government (Al-Kahtani “A Saudi Woman” n. pag.). In addition, Hanadi Hindi is the first accredited female Saudi pilot to fly planes in Saudi Arabia in 2005, a country where women are not allowed to drive and this can mark, as Ghazanfar Khan views, a historic move for Saudi women (“The First Saudi” n. pag.).

It is obvious that Al-Sanea’s motivation in *Girls of Riyadh* is to disclose the unjust society guided by traditions that victimize both men and women in an attempt to reform it, not to confirm negative stereotypes about the Saudi society as the Western readers may prefer to perceive it. The novel stresses the need for the Western people to rectify their stereotypical perception of Saudi and Arab women as passive, backward, and silent and encourages Saudi/Arab people to benefit from the positive aspects of the Western politics, and culture to move beyond the rigid negative social traditions that affects the development of the society.

Conclusion

Generally, I can conclude that there is no one Saudi identity, man, or woman, in the sense that the country is vast and culturally heterogeneous. The traditions prevailing among the tribal inhabitants differ from those of urban dwellers, and which differ, within the same region, in accordance with the socio-political, economic and religious position of the family.

Girls of Riyadh negotiates Saudi traditions and modernization on the one hand and mediates between the Saudi Arabia and the West, who still stereotypes Saudi women as passive, illiterate, backward, religiously fanatic and unchangeable, on the other. Most of the characters of this novel experience life in the West, especially in America and are capable of adjusting to the American culture and openness while being there. The novel addresses both Saudi/Arab and Western audiences as it shows that Saudi people fight two battles at the same time, to bring a change to their society and to negotiate with the Western media, scholarship, and popular culture that reduces them to backward and religious fanatic Arab/Muslims. The author of the novel herself is currently in the US for her postgraduate studies, and even long before, like many Saudis, she used to go outside Saudi Arabia for vacation.

The novelist can be seen as a mediator between Saudi/Arabs and Americans. Her characters, like the half-half Saudi-American Masha'el, are trying to negotiate the two worlds emphasizing the importance of cultural exchange between the Arab and the Western worlds, and the American in particular. Therefore, this novel can be considered as an important site for socio-cultural negotiations within and outside the Saudi society. It brings Saudi people closer to people of other cultures in an attempt to help them move beyond their stereotypes about Saudi people and cultures, especially about the status of women. The novel negotiates boundaries emphasizing the importance of communication among Saudis on the one hand,

and between Saudi/Arab and Western people on the other. Crossing the national borders and negotiating across cultures, *Girls of Riyadh* can be considered as a link between contemporary Arab and Arab-American women writers.

4.2 Bridging Two Worlds: Cultural Intersections, Ethnic connections, and Trans-National Negotiations in Diana Abu-Jaber's *Arabian Jazz* (1993) and *Crescent*⁴ (2003)

No one today is purely *one* thing. Labels like Indian, or woman, or Muslim, or American are not more than starting-points, which is followed into actual experience for only a moment are quickly left behind [. . .] just as human beings make their own history, they also make their cultures and ethnic identities.

(Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* 336)

Two cultures can be lighter than one. [. . .] If the space between them—The space they open up—is fluid, like a stream of light, Or wind between two open hands, Or the future, which knows how to change.

(Lisa Suheir Majaj, “The Arab-American Woman Reads Poetry” 33)

Arab-Americans, even long before September 11, had come to realize the importance of exercising self-representation in order to reach social, political, and cultural equality in the US. By doing so, they repeatedly struggle to posit themselves as a viable and important segment of the American culture, rejecting the constant “outsider” treatment that has often tainted their reception in America since the end of the nineteenth century. Literature becomes an important vehicle for such self-representation, encapsulating and exposing the unheard

⁴ The two novels *Arabian Jazz* and *Crescent* are treated as sequels in relation to the themes they address.

stories and experiences of a community and bridging the cultural and political gaps between the Arabs and the Americans in general, especially in the world of post Gulf war and September 11 world where Western media has, more than ever before, made Arabs and Arab-Americans negatively visible on the global level. In such situation, Arab-American writers struggle on two fronts within and across the communal boundaries.

Diana Abu-Jaber's literary work situates Arab-Americans within the American ethnic context while underscoring the transcontinental and cross-cultural Arab-American connections to the Arab world. Thus, in the context of Abu-Jaber's two novels understudy bridging is to be understood as an endeavour to overcome division, the border that separates two worlds—the Arab and the American. In an interview with Evans, Abu-Jaber explains:

My experience growing up was that we would be Arab at home and American in the streets. So there was always a sense of division and boundary [. . .] I wanted to bridge that, find a way to make a door or an opening in that separation, and writing a book was one way for me to do it. It makes sense to me that the characters themselves would be reflecting that struggle. (45)

As discussed in chapter two, Elmaz Abinader's *Children of the Roojme* was trying to reconnect and retrieve the histories of Arabs and their immigrations to the US. In *The Cairo House* Samia Serageldin, caught between two 'homes', has taken a step further questioning and seeking her identity and as to which one she belongs more. Abu-Jaber, in turn, uniquely negotiates the two cultures and affirms Arab-American ethnic identity while keeping the role of a mediator between her American home and the Arab homeland culture. Interestingly, the three writers have different perspectives to the diverse issues of identity, culture and politics

that each writer deals with in her work. Moreover, each work represents a certain (trans)national location in a specific period of history.

It is important to note, here, that Abu-Jaber's *Arabian jazz*, published in 1993, responds to the Gulf Crisis of 1991 and other political events in the Arab world that affect every aspect of the life of Arab-Americans and the relationship between the Arab world and the United States. *Arabian Jazz* was the first book by an Arab-American writer to gain wide attention by the American mainstream people and media. In the same token, *Crescent* gains an additional weight for being published in 2003, i.e. in the post Gulf war and September 11 world, and immediately after the American-led invasion of Iraq. I argue that Abu-Jaber's success in reaching a wider readership in the US is due to the timeliness of her novels touching up on issues that draw the interest of American audiences who are eager to know about the reality of Arab and Arab-Americans through their own voices.

4.2.1 *Arabian Jazz* and *Crescent*: The Texts

Diana Abu-Jaber's first novel *Arabian Jazz* (1993) narrates the story of Jemorah Ramoud, the protagonist, who experiences a sense of conflicting identities quite acutely. Her father, Matussem Ramoud, is a first-generation Arab immigrant in the United States and her mother Nora, who died of typhus on her trip to Jordan, was white American. Because of her mother's untimely death and her father's close ties to his relatives who live in Syracuse's Arab community, Jemorah feels that she is constantly under pressure to adapt to some Arab traditions which she does not quite understand. However, Jemorah eventually realizes that while having two looks at the world can be a confusing experience, it can also be a blessing.

“Arabian jazz,” as cacophonous as the term sounds, is a new form of music created by bridging two seemingly incompatible worlds. By deciding to take into her own hands the control of her destiny, Jemorah feels she begins to find her way “along a path of music.” The cadence of *Arabian Jazz* is as rhythmic and musical as its tone is humorous.

Abu-Jaber's second novel, *Crescent* (2003), is set in Los Angeles and portray the lives of immigrants and Iraqi-Americans. Sirine is the superb chef at Nadia's Cafe, a Lebanese restaurant in a small Near Eastern community in Los Angeles. The menu proclaims “Real True Arab Food,” and the ethnic cuisine, scented with exotic spices and tasting of home, comforts and inspires the Arab and Iranian expatriates who eat here and live, work and study nearby. The food is actually so delicious that non-Arabs frequent the restaurant also. Thirty-nine-year-old, half-Iraqi Sirine is not married and not looking to change her civil status. Her father was Iraqi, her mother American and both died in Africa when Sirine was just nine years-old. Her beloved Iraqi uncle, her father's brother, who is a professor and a teller of tales and fables, has cared for her ever since. Although she doesn't speak Arabic, is not a Muslim nor a member of any religion for that matter, and has never been outside the United States, she feels connected to Iraq and curious about her cultural and ethnic identity. Sirine has a coterie of good friends, including: King Babar, the dog, cafe owner, Um-Nadia, Mireille, Nadia's daughter, Nathan, who has spent a good deal of time in Iraq, Aziz Abdo, a Syrian poet, and the homesick cafe regulars who believe Sirine is a God send. When Sirine is sought out by exiled Iraqi Arabic literature professor Hanif Al Eyad, she is unable to deny the strong emotional and physical attraction and finds herself falling in love, in the process, starts questioning her identity as an Arab-American.

In fact, Nadia's Cafe is the core of *Crescent's* cultural negotiation between Arabs, Arab-Americans, Latinos, and white Americans, among others. A number of the issues that Abu-Jaber discusses in *Jazz* are also raised in *Crescent*. Like Jemora and Melvina, Sirine is of mixed background: half Iraqi and half Anglo-American. And like *Jazz*, *Crescent* highlights the commonalities and celebrates a society that embraces diversity. While in *Jazz* music builds the bridges, food and cooking take on this role in *Crescent*.

In the two novels *Arabian Jazz* and *Crescent*, Abu-Jaber uniquely deals with various themes of "Identity, Culture, and Politics" that include (inter)cultural, trans-national, and inter-ethnic negotiations. Issues of the life of immigrants, displaced people of Arab background in the United States, Arab and Arab-American traditions, diversity of Arab and Arab-American cultures and identities, racial discrimination, confronting negative stereotypes, human commonalities, diversity of Arab and Arab-American perspectives to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and Gulf war, self-criticism, and gender relations, mediating between the Arab and American worlds are dealt with in both novels. However, she addresses all of these serious issues with humour. The perspective of individuals of mixed background in multicultural society is most important to Abu-Jaber. However, in the analysis of the two novels, more attention will be given to the issues that contribute to the theme of cultural negotiation as it relates to the relationship between the Arab world and the United States in an attempt to show the role of Arab-Americans in narrowing the political and cultural gaps between the Arab and American worlds.

4.2.2 Arab-Americans: Diverse Identities, Cultures and Political Views

Although Arab-Americans as a whole share a common ethnic minority position in the US, their internal differences, including national, religious, and even sometimes sectarian distinctions, to name a few, determine varying allegiances that set up clear internal differences between one Arab-American identity and another. For instance, Palestinian-Americans, Iraqi-Americans, Lebanese-Americans, and Jordanian-Americans all fall under the general Arab-American category by virtue of their sharing a common language and broad cultural commonalities. Nevertheless, stark historical markers that compel these groups to leave their countries of origin and relocate to the US vary widely (ranging from civil wars, communal exodus, political persecution, or even the pursuit of a better socioeconomic status, etc.), thus contributing to distinct historical differentiating factors that inform both the individual and communal identities of these subcategories. What unites the various segments of the larger Arab-American community then becomes the space that they collectively exist in, that is the US, as opposed to the place that they have left behind. It is in such a shared space that a common identity is formed, an identity that incorporates the Arab-American experience of ethnic and racial categorization for instance, in addition to the formation of new lines of communication and allegiances between various Arab identities, within the US and beyond.

Diana Abu-Jaber, in *Arabian Jazz*⁵ (1993) and *Crescent* (2003), focuses on the reasons behind the collision between cultures. The two novels address issues of identity, culture and racism in the American society through the portrayal of characters of mixed backgrounds and through the depiction of cultural negotiations within and across boundaries of group identity. Abu-Jaber situates Arab and Arab-Americans in relation not only to group

⁵ In the following I will refer to *Arabian Jazz* as *Jazz*

identity and concerns, but also to the global multicultural. In such context, Abu-Jaber's two novels are an endeavour to negotiate not only the Arab-American identity, but also the Arab and American cultures. Unlike the other Arab and Arab-American women authors whom I discuss in this thesis, Abu-Jaber portrays almost exclusively protagonists of different ethnic backgrounds. Jemorah's and Melvina's mother in *Jazz* is American, and their father is a Palestinian/Jordanian immigrant to the United States. Sirine's mother in *Crescent* is American while her father emigrated from Iraq. These protagonists grow up aware that they are divided between two different worlds, and the novels revolve around their respective ways of dealing with this legacy.

Although her protagonists live in the America, they are also exposed to Arab cultures by living with their fathers or with members of their fathers' family. In both novels, the protagonists lose their respective mothers at an early age, and they have little contact with their mothers' families. The novels focus on a stage in these protagonists' lives at which they are preoccupied with their mixed identity. In *Jazz*, Jemorah, almost thirty, feels the need to make a decision about her future. Her ambivalence about her identity provokes the interference of various characters in the novel. Abu-Jaber chooses a protagonist who inherited both cultures to illustrate ways of bridging the differences between Arab and American values. While in *Jazz*, it is Jemorah's upcoming thirtieth birthday that triggers the soul searching, in *Crescent* Sirine's romantic involvement with Hanif, an exiled Iraqi, stirs her interest in her father's culture.

In *Jazz* Matussem and his family have been living in the United States for thirty years. They moved to Euclid after his wife's death. His sister Fatima moves to Euclid with her husband in order to stay close to her brother and his daughters. Matussem as well as his

daughters work at the Johnson-Crowes Hospital. He is employed at the hospital maintenance office, his eldest daughter Jemorah works in the inpatient billing department, and Melvina, the younger daughter, is a head nurse in critical care. The changes that have taken place in American society between the 1970s and today in terms of ethnic diversification and inclusion of marginalized groups serve as background for the novel. While the novel aims to show the positive changes in American society at large and in the lives of its protagonists, it also depicts numerous incidents of discrimination and racism. Although the novel is narrated from multiple points of view, the perspective of Jemorah, Matussem's and Nora's daughter is predominant. She witnesses the clash of cultures first hand as a child, with the result of growing up confused. The questions that Jemorah wrestles with at the age of almost thirty have been haunting her since her childhood. Although *Jazz* depicts Jemorah over the period of a summer, the novel uses flashback to illuminate her past. Within the family sphere, Jemorah grows up aware of the difficulty of reconciling the two worlds in which she grew up. The tension between these two worlds is not represented by conflicts between her mother and father, but through the in-laws' negative response to her marriage and their tense relationship with their respective daughter and son-in-law. As a child, Jemorah was well aware of the conflicts between Nora and Fatima, her paternal aunt who also resides in the United States. Their fights result from their differing views. Arab culture, which tends to be family oriented, clashes with American individualism.

One of the major contentious issues is the girls' future. The father's family would like to see the girls move back to Jordan, marry and have children whereas Nora wants them to be free to choose between marriage and an independent life. Fatima would encourage the girls to: "come back to home soon, come back to Old Country, marry the handsome Arab boys

and makes [sic] for us grandsons!” (*Jazz* 77), while their mother would insist: “Your home is here. Oh, you will travel, I want you to. But you always know where your home is” (78).

Jemorah has not yet decided what she wants to do and where she wants to spend the rest of her life.

4.2.3 Common Human Experiences: Racism and Discrimination

Abu-Jaber is interested in highlighting common experiences. Although she is fully aware that one needs to be careful when drawing analogies between Arab-American relations and those of other marginalized groups with mainstream America, she nevertheless draws attention to certain similarities between them to address marginalization and discrimination in general. Andrea Shalal-Esa praises Abu-Jaber’s novels for the bridges that she builds to other “communities of colour” (24).

Although her focus is on the Arab-American community, Abu-Jaber shows that Arabs are not alone in suffering marginalization and racism. The portrayal of Jemorah’s love affair with Ricky Ellis in *Jazz*, for example, provides her with the occasion to discuss racist behaviour toward aboriginal people. Jemorah’s and Ricky’s attraction for each other is based on their shared experience. As they are both of mixed background, the discrimination that they experienced as teenagers connects them as adults as they become lovers.

Racism contributes to Jemorah’s indecision and confusion. After his wife’s death, Matussem decides to move from Syracuse to Euclid in an attempt to forget: “He saw their country home as a place of perfect forgetting” (86). However, in Euclid he places his daughters in a hostile environment. The community’s discrimination against Matussem and his daughters comes in various shapes. His neighbour Hilma, for example, keeps her

distance. When she has something to say to Matussem she shouts from across the street. She is afraid that her husband, who left her a long time ago, would be angry with her, should he ever return, for socializing with a “smooth-talking, darky foreigner” (89). This is the image she has of Arab men in general (89). Matussem is not offended by Hilma’s behaviour, but does not know what to think of it. She is not the sort of person that he wishes to get close to, and he “considered this distancing another of the myriad American eccentricities he’d discovered since he arrived. He liked to tell his relatives, ‘I don’t care how many Bonanza you watch, nothing get your brain ready for real America!’” (89). Hilma’s daughter, Peachy, however, becomes Jemorah’s friend. Soon after they move to Euclid, Jemorah discovers that she does not fit in. But even Peachy does not interfere when the other children tease her because of her strange name and her dark skin:

They were relentless, running wild, children of the worst poverty, the school bus the only place they had an inkling of power. She remembered the sensation of their hands on her body as they teased her, a rippling hatred running over her arms, legs, through her hair. They asked her obscene questions, searched for her weakness, the chink that would let them into her strangeness. [. . .] One day someone tore out a handful of her hair; on another someone pushed her down as she stood, her eyes full, the sound of her name ringing in round of incantation. (92-94)

Furthermore, Melvina once overhears Mr. Boink, her father’s boss, refer to him as “the dirty sand nigger” (99). And Ricky, Jemorah’s lover, tells her at one point that Fred, the gas station owner, calls her father “the damn, fool, foreign A-rab” (113).

As Jemorah continues to experience discrimination, she finally makes a decision about her future. At first, Jemorah seriously considers getting married in Jordan. She decides to quit her clerical job of seven years because she is not happy with her life and looks forward to a change. However, her boss Portia, who represents a white supremacist attitude, suggests that she can make Jemorah more content by helping her pass as white:

You know, it's not too late for you. Dh, sure, you're tainted, your skin that colour. A damn shame. But I've noticed that in certain lights it's worse than in others. Your mother could have made such beautiful children - they could have been so lovely, like she was, like a white rose. Still, it could definitely have been worse for you, what with his skin. Now, if you were to change your name, make it Italian maybe, or even Greek, that might help some. I'm telling you this for love of your mother. [. . .] [Y]ou can come under my wing and let me educate you, really get you somewhere. We'll try putting some pink lipstick on you, maybe lightening your hair, make you American. [. . .] I want to save whatever of your mother's clean blood is left. (295)

I agree with Steven Salita that Portia's depiction is heavy-handed and that her opinions are not representative (10). However, one can read this paragraph as Abu-Jaber's way of conveying that such attitudes are not uncommon. Jemorah is deeply shaken by Portia's offer. She also feels that the world has changed and no longer is a safe place. When her anxiety increases, she feels that "she was seeing with Aunt Fatima's eyes" (298) and that she heard her aunt's voice saying: "this is not our place, not our people" (298). Jemorah is tired of fighting racism and agrees to get married to her cousin Nassir from Jordan. But a conversation with family members helps Jemorah see things more clearly. This conversation

changes Jemorah as well as Fatima and Melvina. Nassir would be happy to marry her, not because his grandmother wants him to, but because he has fond memories of their time together as children. However, he tells her that if she intends to go through with it, he wants her to do it for the right reasons and not because of family pressure. He wants her to remember that “the family is a cult organization. In two days they’d have you shaving your head and mumbling to yourself in a bed sheet if you let them. That’s what the game is all about: “how not to give in!”” (324). Before Jemorah can answer him, Melvina and Fatima enter the room. Fatima introduces her two nieces to Nassir as “available,” though Jemorah more so (325). Nassir wants to know why Jemorah would like to move to Jordan. Jemorah tells him that she does not fit into American society, that she does not have a life in Euclid, that she has a job that does not fulfill her, and that she is tired of wanting to be accepted and liked by people who “don’t like Arabs” (327-28).

Melvina disagrees, telling her that she is American and that all Americans, unless they are aboriginal, have come from other places. Jemorah responds that this is not how things work in real life because “[i]ts not enough to be born here, or to live here, or speak the language. You’ve got to seem right” (328). Jemorah believes that if she moved to Jordan, she would at least fit-in in a general, public way (330). While her sister is struggling with her identity, Melvina has long figured out what she wants from life. She tolerates no interference from her family. Unlike her sister, she feels at home in Euclid. She tells her sister that their mother wanted them to make their own choices. She does not approve of Jemorah’s plan to settle down in Jordan because she is not persuaded by the argument that being among people who look like her will make her fit in.

Nassir is not persuaded by the idea that mere being among people who look like you is enough to make you fit in. He tells Jemorah that he currently lives in America to complete a post-doctoral and might not return to Jordan. He wants her to consider her decision carefully and not to think of Jordan as a safe haven. He tells her that if she decides to go on her own, she should be aware that the society does not look favourably on single women and that the 'Middle East' shares intolerance, xenophobia, and violence with all the rest of the world. He adds that if she were to return, she would have the support of her family, but that she would have to deal with family problems as well. Nassir advises her to accept the fact that she does not fit in either society:

‘To be the first generation in this country, with another culture always looming over you, you are the ones who are born homeless, Bedouins, not your immigrant parents [. . .] You’re torn in two. You get two looks at a world. You may never have a perfect fit, but you see far more than most ever do. Why not accept it.’ (330)

In *Crescent*, Arab students, teachers, exiles, and immigrants flock to the café, which becomes the symbol of a recreated home in the midst of a foreign and alienating culture. In fact, the cafe also becomes the core of *Crescent's* ethnic border-crossings. It serves as the central locus of inter-ethnic and intercultural interactions between Arabs, Arab-Americans, Latinos, and white Americans, among others.

4.2.4 The Loss of a Homeland: Humanizing Palestinians and Iraqis

In an interview, Abu-Jaber describes writing about immigration and exile as her “literary obsession” (Shalal-Esa “The Only” 5). She explains: “[W]hat a painful thing it is to

be an immigrant. How when you leave your home country, you don't really know what it is that's about to happen to you. What an incredible experience and journey it is. And how for a lot of people it can be a real process of loss" (5). Abu-Jaber observes that immigration has the kind of hopefulness and optimism to it that exile does not. Exile is more complicated and more charged with issues of race and politics. She states in the same interview: "Particularly for Palestinians and Iraqis, a lot of them are not choosing to emigrate, but rather they're fleeing political persecution or they've lost their homes. It's an act that is not entirely of their own volition. I'm very interested in what the loss of a homeland means for someone" (5).

Nassir in *Jazz* warns Jemorah that the political situation in the 'Middle East' is far from ideal. He describes the Palestinian-Israeli conflict as one act of vengeance following another, and in spite of losses on both sides, the fighting continues. Nassir, who lost a father and a brother in the fight against the Israelis, asks: "I lost them and for what? I am tired of hating. I have Israeli friends who lost even more! Why shouldn't we be the ones to say stop?" (334). He calls the fighting a game without end. Shocked by what her nephew has just told her niece about the political struggle, Fatima finally breaks her silence. She tells Nassir and her nieces about the family's refugee history, the tragic consequences of their displacement, and about her own imprisonment by the Israelis and how she has not been able to find peace after all these years:

What you are saying about my country, my heart and soul? You, who lost the father and brother to these horror, these enemy For all you lose and you learned nothing. . . . What of my losses? What of my parents' shame, driven off the good land and sacred home the father's fathers built? When we were homeless and dying without food, what of the four starving babies I had to

bury still alive, living - I, I, I? . . . Can I buy a bar of American soap and wash these away, as you have washed up your self? (334)

Fatima also discloses for the first time to her nephew and nieces the history of her imprisonment. She tells them that when she was sixteen she was standing alone in Jerusalem in a dangerous street and was arrested by Israelis. She was kept in a dark room for four days and was given no food. She thought God must be punishing her. Although she is released four days later, she feels as though she has never left that dark room: "Here there no escape. And they let me live. After four days alone with misery, I am let go of their prison, I am left even by enemies. I am returned to die again, again, again" (335).

Through the portrayal of Nassir's and Fatima's opposing views about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict Abu-Jaber accomplishes two things. She shows that Arab-Americans have varying opinions about the conflict. She also stresses the importance of talking about the traumatic experience. Sharing feelings of loss and displacement can bring inner peace to the individual as well as create a healthier relationship with the family and the community and lead to better integration. Her aunt's emotional outburst makes Melvina less defiant and more sympathetic towards her. Furthermore, Fatima becomes less prejudiced. She does not hesitate to remain loyal to a formerly Greek bakery that has been taken over by an African-American family - a sign that she is no longer intimidated by the diversity of her community. Abu-Jaber makes it clear again that the integration of displaced people and refugees can only be successful if they are given the opportunity to talk about their trauma.

In *Crescent*, for Hanif, the Iraq that he knew, although inaccessible, does still exist, making his exile more pronounced and painful: "The fact of exile is bigger than everything else in my life. Leaving my country was like [. . .] part of my body was torn away. [. . .] Exile

is like . . . a dim, gray room, full of sounds and shadows, but there's nothing real or actual inside of it" (162). Such a deep sense of loss and absence is countered in the novel by second-generation Arab-American characters like Sirine for whom the US is the only place they have known, with their parents' country of origin remaining a shadowy yet unreal presence in their lives. The complex allegiances that such characters struggle with are underscored during the "Women in Islam" meeting that Sirine attends, invited by Rana, Hanif's student from Saudi Arabia. In response to the intense Rana's insistence that "American Muslims must do everything they can to show support for their Iraqi brothers and sisters" during the first Gulf war (169), another Arab-American woman present counters by saying, "I don't even know why you expect us to know about all these political things. [. . .] We just want to be Americans like everyone else. [. . .] My brothers and sisters are in Orange County where they belong" (170). Such a medley of reactions mirrors a far-reaching complexity in Arab-American's allegiances to their host country on the one hand and their deep-rooted connections to their homelands or countries of origin on the other, mapping out in the process a more sophisticated portrait of the Arab and Arab-American in *Crescent's* ethnic border-crossings.

On another occasion, Han tells Sirine that his prayers have left him. When he escaped Iraq, he took few things with him, among them prayer beads, given to him by his father to help him with his prayers. But he found that his prayers had left him, and he used the beads as worry beads. Sirine also becomes more interested in her father's family. Unable to sleep one night, she carries her family album to an Italian cafe close to her home. While she is looking at the photos, her uncle joins her and they start talking about Iraq and their family. He fondly describes the place where he and her father came from, but is quick to point out

that the Iraq he left is not the Iraq of today. He tells her that he avoided talking about these things because it is too painful for him (126). He explains:

It means talking about the difference between then and now, and that's often a sad thing. And immigrants are always a bit sad right from the start anyways. [. . .] And there's all kinds of reasons why, but the big one is that you can't go back. For example, the Iraq your father and I came from doesn't exist anymore. It's a new, scary place. (127)

As in *Jazz*, in *Crescent* too Abu-Jaber draws an analogy between the Arab and other immigrants' experience. When Eustavio, the server, brings their order, Sirine's uncle asks him if he agrees that immigrants are sadder than other people. Eustavio responds in a mix of Italian and accented English: "Sadness? Certo! When we leave our home we fall in love with our sadness" (127). Han tells her that he tries to forget about Iraq in order to not lose his mind and that he feels closest to the homeless people who live between two worlds and who are exiled from themselves. Sirine comes to understand the painful experience of those who are forced to leave their country of origin.

Abu-Jaber explains "the experiences of Native Americans were so similar to what was happening to Palestinians, the way they were slowly phased out or pushed back, how there were moments of violence, but that native peoples were always constituted as savages or barbarians" (*Jazz* 48) and that she had long been searching "for a metaphor for Palestinians that Americans could grasp in a visceral way [. . .] This country can tend to be so isolated and so muffled from what's happening outside of its borders" (47-48). According to Salita:

Abu-Jaber deliberately crosses cultural boundaries in order to situate the concerns of Arab Americans into a more generally comprehensible framework. The recognition [that the Palestinian experience is similar to the Native American one] becomes integral to *Arabian Jazz* when Jemorah and Ricky Ellis, a half-Onondagan gas station attendant, become lovers. Both have been made marginal by their community and first found solace in one another as children, without conversation. Although they never solidify a relationship, their intercourse symbolizes the entrance of one ethnic movement into the fold of another. The intercommunication provides comfort amid surroundings where Arab and Indian are often represented as being subhuman. (9)

4.2.5 Arab-Americans as Mediators between Arab and American Cultures

Abu-Jaber explains Arabic words, gestures, and customs, and portrays cafes and neighbourhoods as places where cultures can mingle. Interviewed by Shalal-Esa, Abu-Jaber illustrates that she is intrigued by “how cafes create their own cultural environment, their own micro cultures” (5). Arabic words are introduced in Abu-Jaber’s novels under study primarily in the conversations between Sirine and Han, and also in the conversations between Sirine and her uncle and Sirine and Um-Nadia in *Crescent*. The numerous Arabic dishes on the menu are also introduced with their Arabic names and then briefly described. *Crescent* also talks about the famous Lebanese Singer Fairuz, refers to medieval Andalusia where Muslims and Jews lived together, and draws attention to Muslim contributions to architecture and philosophy. It also discusses seating customs in various Arab countries, the relationship

of the United States with various Arabic nations, and provides an explanation of Ramadan, and the list goes on.

Nadia's Cafe is not only an Arabic enclave, but the home of many Iranian shops. Moreover, the cafe is not only a favourite hangout for Arab immigrants and Arab students, but is also frequented by Americans of various backgrounds. And each of them has their special seat, favourite food, and TV shows such as the news from Qatar, Egyptian movies, Bedouin soap operas in Arabic, or American soap operas with Arabic subtitles. Some of those who frequent Um- Nadia's Cafe are:

Jenoob, Gharb, and schmaal-engineering students from Egypt; Shark, a math student from Kuwait; Lon Hayden, the chair of Near Eastern Studies; Morris who owns the news stand; Raphael from-New-Jersey; Jay, Ron, and Troy from the Kappa Something Something fraternity house; Odah, the Turkish butcher, and his sons. There are two American policemen-one white and one black-who come to the cafe every day, order fava bean dip and lentils fried with rice and onions, and have become totally entranced by the Bedouin soap opera plotlines involving ancient blood feuds, bad children, and tribal honor.

(20)

The Cafe is clearly a site where cultural negotiation takes place. However, although it is located in an Iranian neighbourhood, Nadia has few Iranian customers because her chef is half Iraqi. One day, Koorosh, the Iranian owner of the Victory Market enters the restaurant and declares that he will "forgive" Sirine if she learns how to cook his favourite Persian specialty with walnut and pomegranate stew. When Sirine promises to learn how to prepare it, he gives her a potted pomegranate tree. Nadia, the owner of the cafe, is a Christian

Lebanese woman known as Um-Nadia, the mother of Nadia. When Um-Nadia first bought the cafe in 1991 from an Egyptian friend and his wife, she changed the name from “Falafel Faraoh” to “Nadia’s Cafe” after her late daughter and hired Sirine to serve “real true Arab food” (19). Sirine who knew how to cook French, Italian, and Californian cuisine when she began to work at the cafe “went through her parents’ old recipes and began cooking the favourite-but almost forgotten-dishes of her childhood” (19). Mireille, Um-Nadia’s second daughter, also helps at the cafe along with Victor Hernandez, who is of Mexican background, and Cristobal from EI-Salvador.

Throughout the novel, and especially toward the end, the intercultural relations portrayed in the novel change. Sirine’s cooking reflects the various stages that the characters go through. Sirine learns to cook Arabic food by watching her mother and resorts to the favourite recipes of her childhood in Nadia’s Cafe. Later on, however, she prepares new dishes. Her uncle gives her a book from Syria, *On the Delights and Transfigurations of Food*, published in 1892, as a present for her fortieth birthday. When she begins to create new dishes, the flavours become more daring: she mixes roasted peppers into the hummus and apricots and capers into the chicken. Her blending of recipes foreshadows the changes in the relations among people in the cafe: Victor and Mireille get engaged, and Um-Nadia and Sirine’s uncle begin to feel attracted to each other. A year later, her uncle gives her another birthday gift: *Kitab al-Wusla Ila’ Habib*, or *The Book of the Link with the Beloved*, a translation of a medieval cook book. This gift anticipates further changes in the relations among characters. Um-Nadia and Sirine’s uncle become romantically involved, and Han returns to Sirine. Sirine’s blending of ingredients from various ethnic cuisines is a metaphor for the inter-ethnic marriages and friendships in the novel and the changes in society at large.

Conclusion

In both *Jazz* and *Crescent* Abu-Jaber succeeds in bringing the Arab and the American worlds closer, in an attempt to find her own identity and to offer a model for cultural negotiation. I argue that Abu-Jaber, through her novels, is providing a logic that makes both Arabs and Americans tolerate, understand, accept and welcome each other's cultures.

Abu-Jaber's *Arabian Jazz* and *Crescent* depict characters who cross cultural boundaries in terms of tastes in music, immigration, marriage, and in their cooking and eating habits. At the end of each of the two texts she celebrates the US as a nation of many cultures highlighting the importance of differences between cultures in bringing the people of the world closer to each other. Like her characters Jemorah and Sirine, Abu-Jaber herself grew up between two cultures. While someone who grows up in an Arabic household in America might feel torn between his or her parents' heritage and American values, children of mixed backgrounds are faced with the more complex challenge of reconciling their parents' respective cultures.

Adopting a philosophy of blending is the way in which Diana Abu-Jaber resolves her own conflicts and those of her characters. In *Jazz*, Jemorah has various mother figures, her own mother, who crossed cultural boundaries by marrying an Arab, her Aunt Fatima, who wants her to remain loyal to her Arab roots, and Portia who wants her to conform to white America. In the end, Jemorah crosses cultural boundaries herself, explores her Arab roots, and follows the "white American way" by returning to university. In *Crescent*, Sirine learns from her mother how to cook Arabic food. Later, Sirine is trained to cook French, Italian, and Californian cuisine. When Urn-Nadia hires her to cook in the cafe, she returns to her roots

and cooks her favourite Arabic dishes. However, before long she starts blending ingredients and creating new dishes. Sirine, like Jemorah, responds to the various influences in her life by not favouring one, but by blending them. In other words, she does not follow any particular tradition, but asserts her own mixed identity. This kind of blending ring the Arabs so close to the American reader either of the mainstream or of another ethnic groups.

Abu-Jaber's *Jazz* and *Crescent* contribute to the dismantling of blanket and erroneous portrayals of Arabs and Arab-Americans as being indistinguishably homogenous, and include important dissenting voices that invigorate the study of these communities, thus rendering portrayals of their collective makeup more complex in nature. Pointing to strong women's voices within these communities, for example, helps disentangle Arab women not only from the constraints of their patriarchal societies, but also from the condescending campaign heralded by some "white American feminists" to save their oppressed Arab and Arab-American sisters from repressive cultures, regimes, and religions.

4.3 Toward East-West Peace: Universal Identity, Cross-Cultural Reconciliation, and Global Dialogue in Naomi Nye's *Habibi*⁶ (1999)

When we were born we were blank pieces of paper; nothing had been written yet.

(Naomi Nye, *Habibi* 183)

I believe peace is possible. As my father kept saying [...] People will have to become exhausted enough with fighting to embrace peace.

(Naomi Nye, Interview with Melissa Tuckey 2)

⁶ Habibi is an Arabic word which means a dearly loved person.

The time has come for Palestinians and Israeli Jews to sit down and discuss all the issues outstanding between them.

(Edward Said, *The Question of Palestine* 51)

The people of the world can live together in peace. We know that is God's vision. Now that must be our work here on Earth. (13)

(Barak Obama, "Remarks" 1-2)

4.3.1 Theoretical Background

Contemporary Arab-American women writers like Naomi Shihap Nye have realized the increased tension between the Arab and the American worlds much before the event of September 11, 2001. Nye in particular has tried to place her writing in the US ethnic literature, a position that allows her to represent Arabs in America, and Americans in the Arab world without being suspicious of her loyalty. In the context of post September 11 world, Nye observes that Arab-Americans may feel twice as compelled to express their sorrow and anger about the September 11 Attacks because of their affiliation with the Arab world, but she also urges her readers to remember the many innocent people in the Arab world who have not committed any crime. Her work focuses on the lives of these people-the villagers, farmers, children, grandmothers who try to live "solid, considerate lives, often in difficult conditions" (*19 Varieties of Gazelle* xvii).

By focusing on varied thematic concerns including such concepts as in-betweenness, multiplicitous home fronts, among others, Nye brings the rich and complex cultural, religious, historical, national, and linguistic backgrounds embedded in the term Arab-American to the fore. Such position makes her beyond the simple categorization and allows

her to posit a universal identity addressing diverse universal concerns such as war and peace, cross-cultural, trans-national and interfaith dialogues, yet celebrated by people of different national, political, ethnic, and religious backgrounds.

In analyzing Naomi Nye's novel *Habibi* I draw on Asian-American theoretical and critical issues like that of Bhabha's "Third Space" to elucidate the ways in which Arab-American writers like Nye contribute to discursive formation of Arab-American individual and communal subjectivities. Borrowing such concerns from US ethnic minorities like Asian-Americans stresses, and develops, the connections that exist between Arab-Americans and other hyphenated communities in the US. On the other hand, the analysis of *Habibi* will show how contemporary Arab-Americans like Nye present the two sides of the hyphen from the space in-between.

4.3.2 *Habibi*: The Text

In Naomi Shihab Nye's *Habibi* (1999), Fourteen-year-old Liyana is an Arab-American girl for a Christian American mother and Arab-Palestinian father of a Muslim background. Liyana is unhappy when her parents decide to move the family from St. Louis to Palestine, where her father, Poppy, grew up. Poppy wants his wife and children to know the place of his youth, to experience his culture, and to meet his family, who have been complete strangers to them until now. But moving to a new world is difficult on Liyana and her younger brother, Rafik. It is not until Liyana meets Omer in Jerusalem and falls in love with him that she begins to feel more at home again. Unfortunately, Omer is Jewish, Liyana is Arab, and their friendship is almost impossible, especially in a culture where relationships

between boys and girls are not favored. Later, the family accepts the friendship between Omer and Liyana when she convinces them that he is a moderate Jew.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has not gotten any easier over time. Religion divides whole segments of the populations - Christians, Muslims, Jews, and so on. Jerusalem is a holy city for many religions, and many want it for themselves. Liyana and Omer discuss religion. The former belongs to a non-denominational Christian family, the latter is a not-terribly-orthodox Jew. Both agree about religion although their families are critical on religion when it is misunderstood and misused by people. Religion seems to divide people rather than bring them closer.

Underlying their daily lives is the violence between Palestinians and Jews. Israeli soldiers destroy Nye's grandmother Sitti's bathroom and Palestinians bomb a Jewish marketplace. Israeli soldiers react and shoot Liyana's friend Khalid, and her father is jailed for trying to help him. Liyana becomes extremely frustrated by the cycle of violence. Her frustration diminishes on knowing that, like herself, there are people who believe in peace and work for it. For example her Christian American mother joins an organization established by Palestinian women, her wise Muslim grandmother Sitti celebrates the friendship between Omer and Liyana and believes that peace is possible since there was a door in the heart that had no lock on it.

One of the major themes of *Habibi* is the possibility of peace between Palestinians and Israelis, Arabs and Israelis, Muslims and Jews, and Americans and Arabs. The novel moves from the Arab-Israeli-Western conflict to address wider global concerns such as promoting cross-cultural, political, and religious dialogues among people across the globe. The cultural differences that the protagonists encounter are not slighted or over-emphasized,

but presented in the context of the story and individual lives. The novel emphasizes the role of the communication between individuals as a connective bridge that can achieve tolerance, understanding, and peace.

4.3.3 Shattering Stereotypes: A Bridge between Arabs and Americans

Nye's *Habibi* portrays the Arab world through the perspectives of young protagonists who are Arab and American, Muslim, Christian and Jew respectively. The Arab characters in do not fit the stereotype of the angry, fanatical mob from "over there," but are portrayed as individuals whose lives are concerned with family, friends, school, and social activities familiar to American people. It is an effective in showing the positive aspects of the Arab world. The portrayal of Arabs, and Muslims differ from the hostile images usually presented in movies, cartoons, and video games in the US. The novel employs situations from the Arab world to highlight the positive aspects Arab peoples and their desire for peace: "Her [Liyana] father always told them the Arabs were famous for their hospitality" (*Habibi* 248). Through the influence of the Arab grandmother Sitti they learn about Arab heritage and daily life in village. Sitti's character and her appearance, world view, and her relationships with others reflect Nye's fondest memories of her own grandmother. Sitti epitomizes the wisdom, goodness, and happiness that are the foil to the violence, oppression, and sadness that American media associate with the Arab world. Thus, *Habibi* is partially a response to the dehumanizing images of Arabs and the Arab world perpetuated by media..

However, *Habibi* does not ignore the conflicts and the violence between Palestinian and the Israeli governments. But these issues are put into the context of daily life. Nye's constructions of everyday life in Jerusalem and its surroundings illustrate that Palestinian and

Israeli identities are more complex than the stereotypes of violence and enmity that are highlighted in the media. The text suggests the complexity of cultural identities that cannot be easily categorized or attributed to all the people of a certain community or background. Sitti is not the only character through which American presuppositions about Arab peoples are countered. For example, interactions among Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs do not always or automatically revolve around an assumed enmity, as exemplified through Liyana's friendship with Omer. Liyana learns through her Jewish friend Omer that not all Jewish Israelis hold negative views of Arabs and Muslims: Omer often visits Arab friends in Jerusalem and enjoys learning more about their culture and community.

Habibi's response to the tragedies created by the Arab-Israeli-Palestinian conflict suggests that people prefer living in peace instead of in violence. Only through dialogue will Muslim, Arabs and Americans be able successfully resolve issues. Violent actions perpetuate misunderstandings among people. Liyana, the protagonist, emphasizes the importance of words and encourages her audience to learn languages of different people from different cultures. She herself learns Arabic and Hebrew. Nye suggests that using words with care will aid the cause of peace. The communication between people is one way of using the power of words to achieve peace. Nye suggests 'dialogue' to resolve the conflict in the 'Middle East' rather than military force or bomb attacks which are futile and bring more violence.

Liyana refers to her Palestinian grandmother to show that Islam is not about violence or intolerance. Though this woman has not travelled beyond her village, except for her pilgrimage to Mecca and a couple bus trips to Jordan, she is aware of and respects the differences among people. She says: "You will need to be brave. There are hard days coming. There are hard words waiting in people's mouths to be spoken. There are walls. You

can't break them. Just find doors in them [. . .] You already have. Here we are, together” (Habibi 270). Similarly, she finds Liyana as the one who can fight the best for the cause of peace. Sitti encourages Liyana to do her best in order to realize her beautiful future as a peacemaker saying that “you have a powerful world in there [America]. Be strong. Keep letting it out” (271).

Susan Bloom's review in *The Horn Book Magazine* asserts that “Nye's poignant and intelligent writing invites us to alter our image of this most complicated region and get behind the stereotypes to see the human connections in (artistic) themes” (229). Nye's ability to evoke such reception is directly related to her ethos as an Arab-American who is able to speak from experiences in the Arab world.

4.3.4 Building Space for Peace: The Palestinian-Israeli Conflict

The novel mainly addresses the Palestinian-Israeli question, which embraces, of course, the larger issue of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Nye dedicates her novel *Habibi* to “my Armenian friends in the Old City of Jerusalem. And for all the Arabs and Jews who would rather be cousins than enemies” (n. pag.). The term “habibi” meaning “a dearly loved person, a favourite, a charmer” (*Habibi* 213) encompasses all aspects of the novel and converges all themes in conclusion. The endearing term “habibi” suggests the importance of love as a practical way to peace between Palestinians and Israelis, Arabs and Jews, Americans and Arabs, and Muslims, Christians and Jews. To set the stage for her arguments about the possibility of peace between Palestinians and Israelis, Nye begins her novel with questions which she attempts to answer through the novel. Quoting Anndee Hochman, she questions:

Is a Jew a Palestinian? Is a Palestinian a Jew? Where does one begin to answer such a question? I will say this: we are cut from the same rock, breathe the scent of the same lemons and olives, anchor our troubles with the same stones, carefully placed. We are *challah* and *hummus*, eaten together or make a meal. (qtd. in *Habibi* II)

Arguing for the possibility of peace, Liyana believes that achieving peace is not a utopian idea because peace between Jews, Christians and Muslims had been once existed. Historically Jews and Muslims had lived in peace in Palestine. Asserting this fact Liyana says:

My father [Liyana's father] would take his square of Arabic haresa, a delicious cream-of-wheat cake with an almond balanced in the center, outside on a plate. His Jewish friend Avi from next door brought slices of date rolls. And a Greek girl named Anna would bring a plate of honey puffs or butter cookies. Everyone like everyone else's dessert better than their own. So they'd trade back and forth. Sometimes they traded two ways at once. Everybody was mixed together. My father says nobody talked or thought much about being Arabs or Jews or anything. (28)

Highlighting their common background, Liyana is not surprised that Omer "being Jewish in a place made up mostly of Arabs and Jews" (*Habibi* 164). Though Liyana believes that people should overcome their differences in time, she does not ignore the brutal reality of the society in which ordinary people of both sides are victims. She is realistic in showing how Palestinians suffer and that her father's families lost their house and money in the bank. Many of their community members were suffering too. They were treated as second-class

human beings denied normal human rights. She is equally aware that Jewish people also suffered and she believes that their suffering could be used positively to make them more receptive of the peace process. She says: "I know the Jewish people suffered so much themselves, but don't you think it should have made them more sensitive to the sufferings of others, too?" (166). Omer also agrees that the history of fighting is: "bad history without a doubt. [. . .] Nothing to be proud of" (166). Omer and Liyana's mutual understanding establish a good ground for deep and fruitful discussions. They agree to search for the right solution for the problem of conflict and violence. This serious attempt to establish a common ground that can help bring both Palestinians and Jewish people together starts with Omer's question to Liyana: "So what are we going to do about it?" (166). The first important thing is that both sides must be willing to work for the cause of peace. Liyana says: "I have hope for peace, do you?" and Omer responds "'Of course I do'" (167). This desire for peace makes them discuss the strategies to indicate the peace process and the obstacles facing it.

Habibi is critical about extremist groups coming to power and creating more conflicts and victimizing people of both sides, the Palestinians and the Jews. Liyana reminds the extremists that peace can never be achieved through religious fanaticism. She writes: "Why would any God want to be only large enough to fit inside a certain group of hearts?" (182). More important than the issue of religion is the conflict itself. While there were some people, like Liyana and Omer who did not care about each other's ethnicity, most people did. Nye shows a lot of the terrible human rights abuses and bullying of Palestinians by the Israelis. She also shows that the conflict isn't one-sided. For example, a Palestinian leaves a bomb in a Jewish marketplace. Of course the Israeli soldiers react, and end up shooting an innocent child from a refugee camp in the leg, and when Poppy tries to interfere, he is thrown in jail

for a short time. Violence kills people, innocent men and women, and ordinary shoppers. Such brutality comes as a reaction to the earlier cruel situation, when a bomb killed many people in a Jewish market. Liyana thought: “May be it was done by the Arab father whose ten-year-old son was shot by the Israeli soldiers. ... Maybe it was done by the brothers of the tortured prisoners” (235). Whatever the reason, Liyana is frustrated to find that violence against innocent people leads to more violence. She is very aware of the consequences of violence and its effect on peace process, in this regard she wonders:

Did people who committed acts of violence think their victims and their victims’ relatives would just forget? Didn’t people see? How violence went on and on like a terrible wheel? Could you stand in front of a wheel to make it stop? (235)

Thus, Liyana’s stance about the peace building is obvious that peace can be the result of mutual understandings and dialogues between individuals, on the one hand. On the other hand, it becomes possible when the power in both societies is given to moderate leaders rather than being in the hands of religious fanatic leaders. Liyana’s father as an Arab Palestinian moderate Muslim believed that: “Fundamentalists talk louder than liberals [. . .] That’s too bad. Maybe we moderate people should raise our voices” (179). The novel suggests that peace is possible when Arabs and Jews as individuals appreciate and understand each other beyond the rigid boundaries of religious fanaticism. The moderate leaders in both societies who believe in peace and the co-existence of Jews and Muslims, Palestinians and Israelis can make peace achievable—either on the basis of one or two-state solution.

4.3.5 New Beginnings: The Arab/American Role and the Two-State Solution

Unfortunately, a solution often sought when anger, resentment and misunderstanding occurs between two cultures is war. The lack of effective intercultural communication was partly responsible for Western countries, such as the US, investing its mighty resources to strengthen its war machine. The US, an example of social and political freedom, has been confronted with a complex challenge to maintain the basic constitutional rights of its own people because of this intercultural and international communication failure. People are suspicious of each other's intentions, and the life of the human being is at stake. Young Arabs and young Americans are dying in Iraq and in other 'Middle Eastern' countries without having the chance to communicate with each other and understand each other's cultures. The occupation of Palestine, the invasion of Iraq, and the racial portrayals of peoples and cultures were among a few factors that demonstrate how understanding the reality of "the Other" is significant to the world peace; and since any culture is a product of a historical context, it cannot be understood without understanding its historical context. The criticism of Nye's *Habibi* is an attempt to build a bridge between the Arab and the Western cultures. This novel, thus, tries to explore the possibility of creating hope, change, and shared meanings through negotiation and dialogue.

As mentioned in the introduction of this thesis that a novelist can be a philosopher and a politician, Nye's fiction explores possibilities of cross-cultural dialogue to resolve the Arab-Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It seems like a political proposal for bringing peace to the 'Middle East' and achieving cross-cultural understandings among people of the whole world.

The conflict between the Arab/Muslim world and the West, partly, stems from the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Therefore, achieving peace in the 'Middle East' can be a remark

for the possibility of building peace on the global level. To answer the question whether it is possible to resolve the Arab-Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as Nye's *Habibi* makes it possible, it is important to refer to the new shifts the American politics has taken under the administration of the new American president Barak Obama regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict. A close reading of the Nye's *Habibi* shows that Obama and Nye share similar ideas and hopes about the peace between Arabs and Israelis. Palestine's issue is the major reason behind the Arabs-Israeli conflict which resulted in four major wars between Arab countries and Israel, i.e. 1948, 1956, 1967, and 1973 wars. President Obama is focusing on reviving Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. The Obama's administration is hoping that the hawkish Israeli leader Benjamin Netanyahu will publicly endorse Palestinian statehood for the first time on the basis of the United States policy that supports the "two-state solution", with Israel and Palestine co-existing peacefully as neighbouring states (Saine n. pag.). President Obama's special envoy to the Middle East, former Senator George Mitchell, said in May 2009 that "conflicts are created by human beings and can also be resolved by human beings" (Elshinnawi n. pag.) and this the major theme in Nye's *Habibi*. The leaders of Israel, the Palestinian Authority and some other Arab leaders have a series of talks in Washington this month, May, 2009. Their talks with President Barack Obama reflect the importance the administration has placed on finding a peaceful solution to the long-running Arab-Israeli conflict (Saine n. pag.).

In the context of the new American position regarding the Palesinian-Israeli issue, Liyana and her American mother can be viewed as American envoys to the Arab world to revive the peace talks between Arabs and Jews towards achieving a "two-state solution" that can bring peace to the whole region. When everything seems so grim, like nothing can make

this situation any better at all, Nye's *Habibi* introduces us examples of struggles toward achieving Peace. All the troubles and conflicts did not stop Liyana, her family, Omer, and other people of different religions and ethnic backgrounds from working toward peace.

Instead of being frustrated, the narrator asserts:

Liyana's whole family seemed to be joining things. Poppy had joined a human-rights group to focus on treatment and services for the people. Rafiq joined an ecology club at his school—they would work with garbage and recycling. Their mother belonged to a Women's Communications Club—women of different backgrounds writing letters to editors and sharing optimistic ideas. She would probably be elected president soon. After their first meeting, the *Jerusalem Post* wrote an editorial saying if other people followed their example, the peace process might zoom ahead. (215)

Liyana's American mother worked hard among women of different backgrounds for the cause of peace. She helped to make the vision of peace achievable and would soon be elected a president. In other words, people have become aware of the importance of peace and America can play a crucial role along with other Arabs and Israelis to make peace achievable. Both Obama and Nye seem to share optimism about the possibility of bringing peace to the region supporting talks and dialogues among people. Obama's policy is to support the peace process on the basis of some treaties such as "the Road Map," a policy which is emphasized in *Habibi*'s chapter entitled the "Map". "Map" opens with Liyana lightening a candle and willing for a map that says "Here is the country of littleness. ... Here are roads leading every direction" (265).

In *Habibi*, Americans, Arabs, and Jews are the main characters and the novel revolves on their discussions about the importance of moving the process peace a step forward. Nye also suggests many ways for achieving this purpose. One of her suggestions is that as the problem is created by human beings, it can be resolved by human beings through healthy dialogues and mutual respect and understanding. In the novel, Liyana's American mother, Liyana and her father, the Arab-Americans, Omer, a Jew, and Sitti, the Palestinian Muslim grandmother, all become a family. This is obvious from Omer words when he said that ". . . they felt like family to him. She wished they didn't have all these troubles in their shared country" (258). The Palestinian response to the Jewish attitude regarding the need for peace is represented by the words of Sitti who comments on Omer words saying: "We have been waiting for you a very long time" (258). The supporters of this kind of negotiations are those persons who came from the United States, Poppy and his family. It seems that they are just like those American congressmen who are travelling now in the region, Arab world, to say that peace is possible because the administration is now committed to it (Khalaf, n. pag.). In the last page of the novel when the grandmother encourages Liyana to keep up working for achieving peace using the power and support of America, Liyana promised to be committed to it confirming: "I'll try" (*Habibi* 271) and her solution for the Palestinian conflict is the "two-state solution" stating "She [Liyana] needed her family, two countries, and her new devotion to-trade" (267).

President Barak Obama said that "both Israel and the Palestinians would have to meet obligations under the 2003 Middle East "roadmap," which call on Israel to halt settlement expansion in the occupied West Bank and for the Palestinians to rein in militants" (Spetalnick and Heller n. pag.). What Obama has said shows the clear vision of Nye and her

devotion to the peace process in the region. Relating the current political situation and the policy of America in achieving peace in the region makes us feel that as if Nye's *Habibi* is the theory that Obama follows in his policy toward the Arab-Israeli issue.

The protagonist, like the reader, comes to realization that while war or fighting is not unavoidable, (nor is change), people can try their best to achieve peace as it existed in the past. In fact, Nye succeeds in making the hope for peace compellingly personal and concrete as long as Palestinian and Israeli people like Liyana's grandmother Sitti can say, "I never lost my peace inside" (*Habibi* 247). Sitti tells Omer that he has to take his part in bringing peace and it will be difficult to break the walls, but he can "find doors in them" (270). The last chapter of *Habibi* is entitled "Doors" where Nye concludes that "There was a door in the heart that had no lock on it" (268). Relating Nye's *Habibi* to the current political scene regarding these "doors" of hope for peace, an article in Financial Times by Roula Khalaf entitled "Obama opens door of hope on Palestinian conflict" makes the novel very realistic and Nye becomes the real opener of the door of hope for peace after 12 years of publishing *Habibi* in 1996. Thus, the United States is pursuing what's called the two-state solution-an independent Palestine living in peace next to a secure Israel, and this was the core theme of Nye's *Habibi*.

I can further contend that *Habibi* seems as an answer to Edward Said's *The Question of Palestine*. Said throughout his book made numerous arguments in an attempt to suggest a solution for the Arab-Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but unfortunately he did not reach any conclusion that may make a practical suggestions that can help in making the peace process achievable. Instead, he shifted to talk about the history of Zionism drawing on many historical sources. On the contrary, Nye engages literature as both art and a venue for

activism in a way that could suggest solutions for the issues raised and test them one by one to reach a conclusion. Through the images of maps, and roads in reference to the 'Road Map,' *Habibi* implies that 'a two-state solution' is the possible resolution that can make peace process achievable in the Arab world.

4.3.6 Global Peace: Communication as a Connective Bridge Across Worlds

Nye's *Habibi* draws attention to the universality of themes and global connections among peoples. Nye's background and view of religion parallels the complexity of the perspectives expressed in *Habibi*. Scenes in *Habibi* that focus on the topic of religion-Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Hinduism-indirectly comment on the tensions within as well as among different groups. The Christian missionaries who visit Liyana's family in Jerusalem are interested in helping the poor, specifically the Christian poor. When Liyana's father suggests that they can come with him to the hospital to help Muslim Palestinians, the missionaries contrive an excuse not to help. The scene illustrates the hypocritical stance of such missionaries, who are willing to help some people but not others "Others", without a specific statement being made by the narrator or the characters. No one religious, ethnic, national, or cultural group is portrayed as superior to others; *Habibi* does a convincing job of pointing out the overlapping values and views of different groups. Nye believes that "when we were born we were blank pieces of papers; nothing had been written yet" (*Habibi* 183). Commenting on religions, Nye writes:

Liyana's parents did not believe everyone was an automatic sinner when they were born. Too dramatic! All people on earth would do good and bad things

both. Poppy said every religion contained some shining ideas and plenty of foolishness, too. (177)

Habibi invites readers to see themselves in a global context where differences are celebrated, while recognizing that all people are equal. Nye's text shows how intercultural relationships and respect can develop through communication and openness to differences. When asked how she encourages cross-cultural understanding in her texts, Nye responded, "I would hope that writing for young people might serve as an invitation to get to know some of those other slightly different folks out there in the world-without fear, without thinking of 'otherness' as a threat" (Castro 227).

In *Habibi*, Nye makes her point about the expected differences among peoples through Liyana's use of the images of maps, roads, directions and doors. Liyana believes that the diversity among people will lead to harmony rather than conflict: "Liyana kept thinking how everybody was a little like everybody else and nobody was the same" (195). She later wonders: "why does everything sound like something else? (265). The images of maps and roads allude to the multiple cultures around the world and suggest the impossibility, and undesirability, of everyone living the same way: "'I want a map that says, 'Here is the country of littleness, where words first fell into your mouths. Here are roads leading every direction. Some people will travel many roads. Some will set up camp close to their first homes. Some will stop loving their old words'" (265).

To highlight the issue of religion, Liyana and Omer, in *Habibi*, discuss religion and the things they tell each other about their views and their families' views really struck a chord with any moderate or secular person in the world. Liyana had not been raised within any particular formal religious group. The entire family believed in reincarnation, because it

made sense to them. They did not believe in the devil, just people doing devilish things. Liyana's mother says that they weren't traditionally religious. They respect all religions, Liyana's mother believed a whole in karma, the Hindu belief. Liyana herself liked the eightfold path in Buddhism, and the idea of bodhisattva, like them Rafiq also believed in sandalwood incense. Omer also is not a fanatic religious Jew, he says: "I am not officially observant of—the religious practices of Jewish people" (167). Thus, Both Omer and Liyana's family are critical about religions when they are manipulated by people to serve their own political motives rather than to bring people closer. Liyana asserts: "Poppy said every religion contained some shining ideas and plenty of foolishness, too". "The worst foolish thing is when a religion wants you to say it's the only right one. Or the best one" (177). Omer also criticizes the Jewish idea of being "chosen" and comments on that explaining "may be Jews are also chosen to suffer" (178). Their ideas about religions seem to suggest that peace can not achieved on fundamentalist religious grounds, rather religions become barriers on the way of peacemaking. Commenting farther on religions Liyana remembers her father's words when he wondered that:

Does it make sense that any God would choose some people and leave the others out? If only Christians or Jews are right, what about most of Asia and the Middle East? All these millions of people are just--extras? Ridiculous! God's bigger than that!" (179)

By establishing the moral character of her Palestinian grandmother and her devotion to an Islam that emphasizes peace, Liyana further strengthens her own ethos as someone situated between the perspectives of Muslim Arabs and Americans. Nye views that the intolerance of some extremists does not represent Islam and her Muslim grandmother would.

Similarly, the cruelty of some extremist Jews does not represent Judaism. The grandmother is not an intellectual or even an educated person and she never even travelled outside her village: “It was so rare for Sitti to leave the village. She’d even decided to postpone her trip to Mecca again.” (268), even though she believes in peace and work for it. This means that peace is possible if people believe in it and the first step for peace is a mutual understanding between people of different religions, cultures, and ethnicities regardless their gender, social classes, languages, or locations.

Having lived between cultures and borders, Nye expresses appreciation for the way in which her worldview has been enriched by multiple perspectives and ways of life: “I didn’t fear differences. In fact, I loved them. This is one of the best things about growing up in a mixed family or community. You never think only one way of doing or seeing anything is right” (Space vii). Nye has been recognized and applauded for the way she engages intercultural issues and relationships. “Throughout her work, Nye challenges rigid boundaries of identification, calling attention instead to the multiple and often overlapping categories that constitute identity, including gender, ethnic origin, religion, and geography” (Shalal-Esa n. pag.). I argue that Nye’s writing reflects her appreciation of differences, as well as the small, the local, and the personal aspects of daily life: “There is so much we overlook, while the abundance around us continues to shimmer, on its own” (Nye “Defining” 47).

4.3.7 Conclusion

It is important that Nye’s travel to Jerusalem took place during the 1967 Arab-Israeli war in, which is called *Al-Naksa*⁷ [the setback] in Arabic history as. Nye suggests that any

⁷ In 1967 Arab-Israeli war the Arab militaries were defeated by the Israeli air forces. That period marked a turning point in the history of Arabs in all aspects of life.

solution for the Arab and Western conflict should start by rectifying the images of the Americans in the Arab and Muslim world and vice versa. This is what President Obama tried to achieve through his speech at Cairo University on the 4th of June 2009. Such negotiations can lead to new beginnings to bring the people of different backgrounds close to each other and help them move beyond the fear of the ‘exotic Other’.

Highlighting the positive aspects of religions and cultures helps to find the most appropriate way to bridge gaps between people of different backgrounds across worlds. If such understanding is achieved, peace becomes possible. *Habibi* suggests that peace can be achieved when people gain awareness as individuals and realize that the mutual respect between individuals is the true seeds for peace among people of different religious and ethnic backgrounds.

Habibi also contributes to the issues of identity. The narrative reflects the tension between personal and public identities. Identity does not have to be resolved, and indeed this is not done in Nye’s narrative. Nye is an envoy or negotiator in that she does not allow one monolithic voice to dominate; all cooperate to reach a goal though there are differences in opinions and views. The Arab or American identity that she carries with her does not take over other images that Nye seems to be willing to embrace. In this sense, she is a multicultural person and a multicultural writer. While Nye is playing the role of a ‘double agent’ of both Arab and American worlds, she engages voices, images, and concepts that reach beyond mainstream American culture to construct a consciousness illustrative of that overlapping Third Space where cultures meet.

Nye’s hope for peace goes beyond the Arab-Israeli conflict to hope for achieving global peace. Introducing multiple voices from across cultures in *Habibi* is not surprising

considering the fact that the author has traveled twice to the ‘Middle East’ and Asia for the United States Information Agency promoting international goodwill through the arts. When asked about her goals for multicultural texts, Nye asserted that she aims to make many voices available in order “to promote arts of humanity and intelligence that extend and connect us all as human beings” and to help readers see the relationships across cultures (Castro 233).

I argue that *Habibi* is a poignant and powerful call for peace, if not one of the most effective literary works that put the seeds for a practical dialogue between America and the rest of the world, which can lead to narrowing the gaps between people across cultures on the basis of communication, understanding and acceptance.

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Chapter Five

Conclusion

Texts are worldly, to some degree they are events even when they appear to deny it, they are nevertheless a part of the social world, human life, and of course the historical moments in which they are located and interpreted.

(Edward Said, *The World, the Text and the Critic* 4)

All good people agree
 And all good people say,
 All nice people like Us, are We
 And every one else is They:
 But if you cross over the sea
 Instead of over the way,
 You may end up (think of it) looking at We
 As a sort of They!

(Rudyard Kipling, "We and They")

In the introduction to this thesis I draw attention to the fact that the last few decades have witnessed a number of Arab and Arab-American women writers coalesce and work for a larger Arab, Arab-American, and global causes in response to the series of the political events that affect the life of Arabs and Arab-Americans in every aspect of their respective societies. It would be somewhat preposterous on the part of those who are ignorant of the realities of Arab peoples and cultures, particularly the role of Arab women in their respective societies, to expect that Arab women can leave everything and think only about their 'marginalization' by their own men or social traditions. This is the very same orientalist line

the Arab and Arab-American women writers have fought against, as illustrated throughout the discussion of their texts. However, while exploring the diverse and complex representations of Arab and Arab American realities through women's voices located in seven national contexts of the Arab World as well as in the US, it is clear that it is difficult for Arab and Arab-American women writers to represent the realities without simultaneously responding to the reductive stereotypical images that circumscribed the realities of Arab peoples and cultures. These writers express a consistent need to dispel dominant perceptions of Arab peoples and cultures as the quintessential "veiled oppressed woman, terrorist and patriarchal man, and backward homogeneous culture"—a need that consistently detracted from their own socio-cultural, and political commitments in changing their societies as it keeps them afraid of confirming the stereotypes when interpreted outside their own socio-cultural contexts and judged by Western standards. Such situation put them in double binds. They are with the conviction that popular (mis)representations of Arab 'woman' in the Western media and scholarship, though not grounded in the actualities of Arabs women's lives, nevertheless have real and significant negative consequences for the people and culture they are meant to represent. Despite their sensitivity of confirming stereotypes of Arab women, this does not prevent them from depicting realities as lived--by men and women in the Arab and Arab-American communities.

Although the series of political events in the Arab World from 1967 up to the present served for the most part to demonize and ostracize Arabs and Arab-Americans, these events also create an opportunity to bring these interconnected societies to the attention of academics across various disciplines. Such studies can respond to the growing interest on the part of non-Arab critics, scholars, and audiences to know about the realities of Arab people in

terms of politics and culture from the perspectives of Arabs and Arab-Americans themselves, especially in the context of the post-September 2001 events that made Arabs and their cultures negatively hyper-visible on the global level. Therefore, I suggest that exploring the themes in the contemporary Arab and Arab American women's literary works can serve as a site for understanding the complexities of Arab and Arab-American identities, politics, and cultures. I argue that the academic studies on the Arab and Arab-American women's writing can create an interest for the non-Arabs to read the texts and consequently develop a better understanding of Arabs and Arab-Americans in terms of politics, and cultures--including the role and status of women.

Unlike the selective and ideological studies by Western scholars who find the harem, the desert, and the veil to be the prevailing themes as viewed in fictional, autobiographical, and ethnographic texts by both Western and 'Middle Eastern' writers, this study demonstrates that the themes of Arab and Arab-American women are not limited to any topic, but they are rich, diverse, multifaceted, changing and challenging, defiant, pessimistic, resistant, negotiating, and crossing the borders. Their diversity, variety, and instability mirror the diversity and reflect the numerous issues pertaining to the realities of the Arab and Arab-Americans in many ways diagnosing and re-evaluating the conditions from different perspectives and suggesting more than a solution for the issues they tackle in their texts. They include and address all issues central to contemporary Arab and Arab-American societies. This study shows that Arab women write about national struggle, external and internal wars, political conflicts, social injustices, colonialism, occupation, women's issues, global politics, and peace.

I argue that today, more than any other time, that criticism of texts written by Arab or Arab-American writers should be political because in the context of the series of political events in the Arab world since the late part of the twentieth century, namely, from the post-1967 Arab-Israeli war up to the present, everything in the life of Arabs and Arab-Americans is interpreted with political terms. The Arab-Israeli conflict, the Palestinian Issue, the Lebanese civil wars, the Gulf wars, the September 11 attacks, the invasion of Iraq, the ongoing war on 'terrorism', and the persistence of negative stereotyping of Arabs/Muslims in the Western media and scholarship, which coincides with the American intervention in the Arab World, have affected every aspect of Arab and Arab-American peoples' lives. In response to this series of political events in addition to many other civil wars and internal multifaceted conflicts and crises within and between the Arab countries, contemporary Arab and Arab-American women writers place greater stress and commitments on national and global politics as much as they integrate their relations with men and their roles in their respective societies, trying to position themselves as both citizens and women. The increase in the number of Arab and Arab-American women writers and texts are simultaneous with a growing interest to know about the realities of Arab "woman" in the West due to the depiction of the Arab 'woman', who has been repeatedly reduced to a silent and powerless victim through the dominant narrative of war, especially with the US-led wars and interventions in the region. These writers, implicitly or explicitly, combat stereotypes and stilted representations of Arab peoples and cultures, and simultaneously build cultural bridges between the Arab and Western worlds.

Establishing a context of difference prefaces the search for commonality. It is essential to place each woman writer within her relevant context, for her literary production

is directly informed by it. Each writer raises special questions relevant to her immediate Arab or Arab-American society. The writers and characters are of different generations and come from varied socio-cultural, economic, and national backgrounds. Such differences not only involve discussions spanning seven national contexts but also extend to include internal markers that distinguish one individual from another within each of the seven national contexts. Therefore, the critical summary of individual Arab and Arab-American women's texts help to show the diversity and multiplicity that exist in the writer's respective societies as represented in their texts.

This study commences with El Sadaawi's *Two Women in One* as a link between the pre and post 1967's Arab women writers. El Sadaawi asserts, without a critical awareness of the ways in which familial and societal structures work, women would remain tied to the forces which oppress them—whether internal or external. In *Two Women in One*, Bahiah, the protagonist broke away from the negative constraining familial norms in search for her real self and tried to link it with the societal and national, suggesting that refashioning of the individual identity is closely related to the political. In the same vein, El Sadaawi's text implies that the familial injustice is a reflection of a social hypocrisy which expresses a corruption in the state, and the corruption of the state is just an extension of violence in the whole world. The novel suggested that both, men and women, are equally responsible in resisting the traditional, societal, and political illnesses in order to be able to bring an effective progress to the nation.

While, the first generation Arab-American writers like Elmaz Abinader, in her *Children of Rojme*, articulates identities that go beyond boundaries of self, gender, family, nation and showed how the generational and international aspects constructs one's identity.

These writers felt more at “home” depending on their generational relationship to their ancestral land and its political struggles. The identities of these writers are constantly constructed through the act of self invention and self-preservation and more precisely it can be called “generational identity”. Often, the self and family are conflated together into the space of community, in other words the “memories” of the self, family and community defines the subject in question. Here, “the memory”, of individual, familial and communitarian express the resistance while the family and the community serve and reconnect the ancestral-here, the *roojme* in the Lebanon-with the new world where the ancestral Lebanon is a pathological sign or symptom and need to be cured. The new generation Arab-Americans grow up in Western Pennsylvania, never fully American nor, when they return to Lebanon, ever truly Lebanese or Arabs. Elmaz Abinader, one of Camille and Jean's daughters, is hence born and raised in the US and does not see the "old country" until 1973, forty-six years after her parents emigrated.

Children of the Roojme is an unsentimental account of the immigrant experience. While those who left Lebanon still speak Arabic, eat tabbouli, and dream of the Mediterranean view, Abinader never mystifies the past or origin. Though she herself seems somewhat mesmerized by Beirut's beauty and the coastal drive to her ancestral village in 1973 (the beginning of the novel), much of the rest of the novel serves to undermine the easy idealism. And when we consider the gruesome wars that were just around the corner (from 1975 to 1990), much of the pain proves prophetic.

Another aspect of Arab-American identity, “chameleon-like”, is strikingly expressed in Samia Sergheldin's semi-autobiographical novel *The Cairo House*. Here, Gihan or Gigi, the shadow of the author, is confused over her belongingness--to which half of her self she

belonged, Arab or American (Egyptian and American) in a hostile world aftermath the 1991 Gulf wars and in the post-September 11 world. She resists any attempts to construct a single and secure definition of 'home'. This position ultimately leads her to a better understanding of her hyphenated identity. Consequently, it enables a fuller understanding of her self within/without each of these homes. Though the novel mainly revolves around the exilic, hyphenated identity, and the divisions of "home," it is an account of the political history of Egypt since the Egyptian revolution in 1952 up to the 1990s. In brief, the three texts are about individuals who are seeking meaning and connections between the individual and the communal, the personal, the national and the (trans)national existence that is increasingly becoming typical of this globalized world.

While, for some of the Arabs and Arab-Americans, the search for identity happens in the time of conflicts, war, anti-colonial struggle, resistance against occupation, and nationalism often resulted in the suppression, silencing and erasure of their struggles for the sake of "more political" issues like the liberation or sovereignty or the future of the nation-state often dictated by internal and external factors. Some times, they are forced to make clear their preferences and choices or they have to take the risk of being accused for 'betrayal'. Women writers from the countries which have histories of conflict and resistance show how they fight on two fronts at the same time.

Discussing the works of Ghada Al-Samman, Sahar Khalifeh, and Ahlam Mosteghanemi, the study demonstrates how these writers move from addressing the national local to the Arab national transcending them to the (trans)national. Although Al-Samman, the most prolific Arab woman writer of Syrian-Lebanese origin, suggests that the identity confusion present in Lebanon and the Arab World is partly due to colonialist hegemony, she

lays a large portion of the blame on Arabs themselves. Al-Samman exposes the divisions present on many levels in the Arab societies and links these divisions to the issues of civil wars and external invasion and exploitation. Despite, the helplessness that predominates the scene, there are people who are aware of the situation and struggle for bringing a political change that can play a role in transforming the social relations and achieving justice, peace and solidarity. The novels, *Beirut 75* and *Beirut Nightmares* foreground the importance of social injustices and political corruption as they played a central role in leading to civil wars and consequently the invasion of the Lebanon by Israel. She also relates the issues of violence and concept of honour, corruption, prostitution and class difference to the national and stressed on the political reform focusing on social justice, sectarian tolerance, and gender equity which would bring the real transformation of the power relations in the social, political, economic, and gender aspects in the Lebanese society in particular, and the Arab world at large.

The Palestinian reality appears to be different as Sahar Khalifeh narrates us the stories in her novels *Wild Thorns* and *Sunflower*. The characters in the two stories represent various players in the Palestinian society and the “outside” Arab and Western players as well. Here, the question of women and the question of Palestine are interlinked in a way that women’s question evolve directly out of the nationalist discourse. Khalifeh is outspoken in her criticism of Israel and Palestine nationalist narrative as it is reluctant to listen to the women's questions. The novel, *Wild Thorns* narrated from the point of view of men, gives us a critique of the social space of Palestinian nation as a space of action, determined economically on the basis of everyday necessities and tribulations under the Israeli occupation. While *Sunflower* marks Khalifeh’s turn towards the women's point of view of the

Palestinian question, it illustrates the condition of Palestinian people, particularly women caught between the Israel's colonial politics and Palestine's different nationalist ideologies which eventually make women integrate their rights with the national.

While Khalifeh is narrating from “inside” of national-state “not yet fully formed”, Ahlam Mosteghanemi is engaged in narrating the story from the time of the liberation of nation to its post-colonial futures, in her novel *Memory in Flesh*- the first Algerian women's novel written in Arabic. In this novel, Mosteghanemi embraces the history of anti-colonial struggle from 1940s and ends her narration with the post-colonial Algeria in 1988. She creates characters who resemble with the wounds, pain and dilemmas of Algeria and they are caught between the Arab-Islamic and French cultures as the Khalid and Ahlam represent. The novel examines Algerian Arab culture from an Arab perspective and gives an Arabic view of a Western perspective. It reveals the presence of two opposite narratives. The Algerian perspective is presented as a reality while the Western perspective is a discourse with agenda. Ahlam Mosteghanemi focuses on the need of the decolonisation of Algeria as the French colonialism left scars on the body of the country which needed to be cured. As the discussion of the novel shows, *Memory in Flesh* engaged in two kinds of decolonisation: it appropriates the Algerian history and presents the wounds of colonization from the perspective of its victims. And this process of decolonisation envisages the future of the country and its people. The novel paints a complete picture of actors in the neo-colonized Arab World and emphasizes the need to decolonize the Arab mind. Moreover, while being critical on the corrupted Arab regimes, Mosteghanemi also addresses the impact of exile on the nation. She depicts the corruption and difficulties faced by those whose goal is to invest in the people of the next generation. Mosteghanemi urges those in exile to return to their land in order to

nourish the development of the coming generations many of whom are amputated from their past.

Another diversity of Arab and Arab-American women writing that emerged in this study goes beyond the borders of words, identities, culture and politics (and favours a (trans)national flavour) and creates spaces for cross-cultural negotiations and bridging gaps between the traditional enemies. In theorizing Arab-American subjectivities, the study shows that Arab-American women writers negotiate often complex and contradictory ethnic, gender, and class identities which extend across generations of family as well as across cultural boundaries. Contrary to Western stereotypes of sexist Arab men and veiled, oppressed women, this writing is not foremost concerned with what Gagnier call "the dichotomies of gender warfare" (13), but with the strengths and sufferings of both women and men as they celebrate cultural traditions and attempt to grapple with anti-Arab racism in the West, their war-ravaged ancestry, and the effects of imperialist policies on their ancestral lands. Thus, such new and emergent approach of celebrating commonalities, chattering stereotypes, and negotiating differences in the context of the ongoing Arab-Israeli wars, the aftermath of the Gulf wars, and more importantly the post-September 11 world added more global significance to these novels as a connective bridge across worlds.

From the 1990s up to the present Arab and Arab-American women's writings have witnessed a new shift addressing new subjects. The focus of three texts in chapter four mainly address (trans)national, cross-cultural, inter-ethnic, and global issues from various Arab and Arab-American perspectives. These texts are informed by the more recent political events in the Arab and American worlds that have shaped the current global politics such as the Gulf wars, the September 11 events, the invasion of Iraq, the "war on terrorism", and the

ongoing Arab-Western conflict, among others. Special attention has been given by Arab-American writers to the depiction of the 'Arab/Muslim woman', who has been repeatedly reduced to a silent and powerless victim through the dominant narrative of war.

Rajaa Al-Sanea, Diana Abu-Jaber, and Naomi Shihab Nyes deal with a wide range of issues identity, politics and culture. Their writing, partly, centres on broad political and cultural concerns such as the condemnation of war waged on the Arab world, the promotion of (cross)-cultural negotiations and world peace. They respond to a range of factors affecting Arabs in the Arab world and outside. These factors include Western perceptions of Arabs, socio-cultural realities in the Arab world, and recent political events that have the global scene. The discussion of these authors' texts emphasize that they are mainly committed to issues of deconstructing the stereotypes of Arabs and Arab-Americans and constructing bridges between the Arab and the Western worlds by a means of dialogues. The Arab-American women situate themselves in the hyphen-between the two poles of the identity. A positive reading of living on the hyphen allows the members of such community to negotiate the two parts of the hyphen and operate as mediators between two different worlds. This kind of negotiation is particularly important for Arab-Americans who live in a world which wages wars on their homelands and keep suspicious about their loyalty to the new home. Having a hyphenated identity allows them a space to create a balance and consequently get their voices heard by the two clashing worlds. This leads Arab-Americans to take the challenge of reconciling the two cultures to bridge the gap between the two conflicting worlds.

Rajaa Al-Sanea's *Girls of Riyadh* is a critique of the social traditions of Saudi Arabia which denies enough space for women and focused on the victimisation of both men and women by the negative societal conventions. The writer tried to negotiate between the private

space of her generation and the established public space by talking about personal and domestic spaces at minute level and questioned the institution of the tradition. The narrative structure of the novels marked a turning point in the history of Arab women writing as the novelist narrates the story through series of emails and chat room discussions. She set the novel up in the information culture bringing the Arab society closer to 'the global' and new technologies which governs it and at same time uses hybrid languages associated with globalized, wired existences to establish a communication between Saudi people and other people outside the Arab world in an attempt to rectify the misconception about the perpetuated image of Saudi people and society, particularly in the eyes of the Westerners who still perceive Saudi women as illiterate passive *harem*.

Arab American writer Diana Abu-Jaber's *Arabian Jazz* and *Crescent* are focused on the themes of cultural negotiations, inter-ethnic relations, the life of immigrants, exiles, and displaced ethnic Arabs in the United States. These novels foregrounded the necessity of a nuanced understanding of communal and individual identities of the Arab-Americans, their relationship with the Arab world and their role in connecting bridges between Arabs and non-Arabs. She presented characters of mixed racial/ethnic backgrounds and tried to find the reasons behind the clash of cultures, issues of identities and racism in the American society. The author considers the character's of mixed origin as mediators to bridge the gap between the two worlds-Arab and American respectively- and considers past as essential for healing the wounds albeit being aware of the difficulty of reconciling two worlds. The novelist uses food, eating habits and cooking as metaphors for the multi-ethnicity and multicultural identity of the characters. Here the blending of tastes, flavours and culinary habits foregrounded the mixed nature of the identities at question. The characters, from different

cultural, religious, and ethnic backgrounds, are constantly crossing boundaries in terms of cooking, eating, music, communicating, marriage and immigration pointing to the blending of two worlds. Moreover, the act of blending two worlds makes the novelist to find and define her own hyphenated identity and worked as a model for cultural negotiations to be happened for creating a world without conflicts. It is important to note that Abu-Jaber's *Crescent* delves deeper into the question of Iraqis at exile and humanizes Iraqis illustrating the reality about Iraqis and Iraq's civilization which is unknown to many non-Arabs particularly after the gulf wars and invasion of Iraq.

Naomi Shihab Nye, the Arab-American writer of Palestinian descent, tried to bring Arab and Muslim subjects closer to American readers in her novel *Habibi*. Speakers are positioned in the interstices of the space between cultures, a 'third space' according to Bhabha. The narrators in her work act as mediators for creative understanding from the part of American readers. Nye's novel attempted to alter the image of the most complicated region 'Middle East' and stressed the importance of considering differences empathetically. The creation of the other and the magnification of differences between the West and the rest, the description of Arabs, Arab cultures as intrinsically inferior to everything Western, the tendency to describe Arabs as a monolithic unchangeable entity, the depiction of the Arab 'woman' as passive and Arab 'man' as 'terrorist', the portray of the Israeli-Palestinian and the Arab-Western conflicts as a religious or civilizational clashes all challenged in the novel. To support the posed arguments, the novelist shows the issues from the perspective of Arabs, Jews, Muslim, Christian, Arab-American, and American perspectives. In doing so, the novel seemingly, tried to suggest a solution for ending the Palestine-Israel and by extension the Arab-Western conflicts as it served the core theme of the novel.

The critical analysis of the nine texts under study provides an in-depth exploration of some of the major themes and issues currently handled by a majority of contemporary Arab and Arab-American women writers to highlight the most dominant issues characterizing this fast-growing body of writing. This study tries to show how literature not only serves as a medium to elucidate the realities of the Arab and Arab-American political and socio-cultural conditions, but becomes in itself a valuable record of the Arab and Arab-American divergent and multitudinous concerns. This body of literary writings does not only elucidate and humanize the Arab and Arab-American experiences to a non-Arab audience, but it also aids Arabs and Arab-Americans themselves to connect with each other, locating a communal and (trans)national identity while at the same time acknowledging the myriad permutations of this identity as well as its complexity. It is a valuable discipline to investigate questions of identity, politics, and culture for Arab and Arab-Americans since it complicates these questions by offering individualized segments of experience weaving into and simultaneously woven out of a larger and more general Arab and Arab-American tapestry.

The main contribution in "Identity, Politics, and Culture" lies in analyzing nine representative writers from across the Arab world and the United States. This study has analyzed texts of various genres such as novel, memoir, and cyberform novel in conjunction with each other spanning forty years, three continents, and seven national contexts under a unifying theme. The three analytical chapters demonstrate that the writing of Arab and Arab-American women is shaped by historical, locational, political, socio-cultural, generational, and gender factors which informs this body of writing. This study demonstrates that Arabs and Arab-Americans constitute a diverse mixture of people. Contrary to the singular view of Arabs and Arab-Americans, a great deal of diversity exists within and between these

communities in terms of identity, politics, and culture. The label Arab is a complex term that is not easily classified, for Arabs and Arab-Americans can trace their national origins to the twenty-two countries of the League of Arab states, thus linking Arabs worldwide to common cultural, linguistic, and political outlooks. Such categorizations, however, can be problematic, since member states of the Arab League span vast regions in North Africa and the Levant, and Arabian Peninsula—embodying huge variances not only in geographical settings, but also in matters of cultural traditions, , political regimes, faith, and even spoken dialects despite the fact that they all revert to a common classical Arabic linguistic tradition. Arab peoples also make up all strata of society. The image of the fabulously wealthy oil sheik only pertains to a few of the elite members of society or members of royal families. Moreover, a multiplicity of religious identifications abounds in these member states, incorporating Muslims Christians, Druze and Jews. Yet, with all this diversity, Arabs and Arab-Americans are still united by a common thread of identity and a bond of heritage based on culture and tradition that dates back thousands of years.

There is not just one monolithic "Arab woman, man, culture" but many different Arab women, men, and cultures. Each text, implicitly or explicitly, challenges the readers to rethink their perceptions of Arab women and to consider the ways in which Western media influenced their views. More importantly, the texts open a series of dialogues between literatures and cultures, and help in educating the non-Arabs about the realities of Arab and Arab-American peoples and cultures. What the discussed texts suggest is that an analysis of Arabs and Arab-Americans' realities and conditions in general and the women in particular is impossible without contextual considerations. First, it is very important to note that the realities and conditions in Arab and Arab-American societies vary according to the

particulars of the specific histories, cultures, geographies as well as their social, economic, educational, and political backgrounds. One, therefore, should consider the diversity of these local cultures as well as their various intercultural and cross-cultural interactions with other cultures. Second, crucial to the understanding of the diversity of Arab peoples experiences, the fluctuations in the economic conditions and the resultant class rearrangement within the society in question should also be considered in terms of the changing global economy. Third, the women question is contingent upon the fluctuating political situation of the countries in question. It is obvious that the relation between women and politics, and women in politics, are conditioned by the socio-political changes in the countries in which they operate. Fourth, the reality of multiple cultures in the Arab and Arab-American societies world betrays a considerable plurality that undermines the proclaimed singularity of “the Arab man,” “Arab woman,” and “Arab culture.” Therefore, the diversity of Arab cultures, the multiplicity of political atmospheres under which Arab people live as a result of the different political regimes, and the different histories, and the variety of the social traditions, the different religious, and the variety of sects in each religion are all factors that should be borne in mind in dealing with Arab men, women, and cultures. Fifth, though for the better parts of the 20th century up to the present, Arab societies suffered under different (neo)colonial rule and have been influenced by such domination in terms of cultures.

In response to the questions posited in the introduction regarding the role and status of Arab and Arab-American women and the factors affecting their situation in the context of their respective societies, the analyzed literary texts show that the role of Arab and Arab-American women vary from one society to another and even within the same society according to the different factors that determine the roles of women in a certain country.

While these writers identify themselves as Arab and Arab-American, each comes from a different background, has a distinct style, and is concerned with specific issues of “identity, culture, and politics” affecting the local, national, and the international relationships , Arabs, Arab-Americans in local, national and global contexts.

However, I can still draw some conclusions, which necessarily entail some kind of generalization, about how a common culture affects the roles and status of Arab women. “Common culture” here does not refer to a monolithic Arab culture as such but to the similar social and economic conditions which some of Arab societies share. This discussion also examines how socio-cultural, economic, and political positions interact with gender in the discussed novels and produce different forms of injustices--such generalizations are not harmful and do not entail the risk of stereotyping involved in the cruder kinds of Western feminist orientalist reading. Taken in the global context, one of the broader pictures that can be still concluded from the analysis of these texts is that Arab and Arab-American societies, like women everywhere, may suffer from some repressive elements of their societies, but they are not mere mutes. They are constantly struggling and constructing alternative solutions by negotiating all the tribulations that affect their societies as they matter for men and women alike. Arab and Arab-American women play an active role that contribute to the national goals of their countries despite internal and external socio-cultural, economic, and political conditions that hamper their efforts and struggles.

Contemporary Arab and Arab-American women writers repeatedly confront the limited gender roles given to them and negotiate more space of self-representation, and identify themselves and their works as being transformative and challenging to the manner in which they are perceived and treated by two groups: a wider Western public that often

reduces them to orientalist stereotypes, and some traditional concepts of their own societies that often quell or disregard their female voices. Women's issues are also integral to the analysis of the texts under study. The differences between western and Arab women's concerns are highlighted showing that the concept of "feminism" is different from the western. The analysis of the texts implies that Arab "feminism" does exist but it has its own context, for example, Arab women do not perceive their progress in areas like education, political rights, and health care to be synonymous with a western model of feminism. The analyzed texts show that values associated with a supportive family are not unique to the Arabs. The shared values and social systems, including women's struggles encourage to see cross-cultural connections. If feminism is understood as anti-familial then Arab women are not "feminists." In other words, Arab women are not the "exotic" people taken out of context in Western media and scholarship. Arguments against such narrow views of Arabs are found throughout the critical analysis of Al-Sanea's, Kalifeh's, and Nye's texts.

As stated earlier, the study of Arab and Arab-American women's literary writings does not imply that gender in itself determines the nature of literary writing. Instead, it indicates the difference between males and females in experience of life. Though Arab and Arab-American male writers have dealt with the same major issues of identity, culture, and politics, women writers' treatment of these issues are different in attitudes and perspectives. I can argue that women writers surpass male writers by being closer and more sensitive to domestic affairs which help them diagnose the real causes behind the societal ills, and work for solving them. The women writers stress more importance on issues of social justices and peace, as seen in the analyses of the nine studied texts. This can be attributed to the fact that it is women who pay the cost of the consequences of social injustices, conflicts, and wars

perpetuated by men. Challenging the critical claim that women authors write only on love, family, marriage and children, the discussed texts show that women writers are all engaged—in varying degrees and ways—with aspects of the political, socio-economic, and cultural contexts of Arab and Arab-American societies, without ignoring reference to gender issues.

More importantly, the Arab and Arab-American women's literary works, written in the post Gulf wars period, have given special attention to the depiction of the "Arab/Muslim woman", who has been repeatedly (mis)represented a silent and powerless victim through the dominant narrative of war, especially with the US-led intervention in the Arab world. The study also exposes how Arab women's texts undermine stereotypes of Arab women. Said's *Orientalism* discussing the development of Arab stereotypes in general and their perpetuation into the neo-colonial present was focused on male stereotypes; stereotypes of women were not discussed in his influential text. Arab women's texts have been taking up the issue and deconstructing the ways in which Europeans and Americans have imposed the stereotypes of "the illiterate and passive Arab woman". In their writings, Arab women confront such stereotypes, and show the reality of Arab and Arab-American women's lives. Their writings imply that before Westerners can address women's liberation in the Arab world they must first liberate their culture's views about the Arab 'Other,' especially women. The works counter Orientalist notions of Arab women as passive and exotic; these reflections of Arab women's concerns also indicate differences from western feminism, which often tries to "save" Arab women from "backward patriarchy". It is implied that this can be ironic since Western feminists are still fighting their own patriarchal systems, but still view Arab patriarchy as worse than the western version. It seems that Western media is the one who veil the Arab woman, silence them, and make them into a passive victim.

In general, the analysis of the texts of Arab and Arab-American writers show that the quest(ion) for(of) identity is one of the major concerns occupying their creative-intellectual mind, and its determining factors such as political, economic and socio-cultural issues prevailed in the individual, local, national and international levels. In other words the question of self or identity is intertwined with the socio-cultural and political issues. As against the perceived (neo)colonialist notion that ‘the Arab men’ are ‘the enemy’ of the Arab women in attaining their individuality, here the women writers are not involved in any kind of “jihad” against them. Rather, considering the complexity of the issues at stake, they are engaged in a more inclusive and responsible treatment of the issues while not compromising with it. With all the diversity that exist in the Arab and Arab-American societies, Arabs and Arab-Americans are united by a common thread of identity and a bond of heritage based on culture and tradition that dates back thousands of years. The diversity of Arab and Arab-American women’s perspectives and attitudes in addressing a wide range of issues that moves from the individual to the communal through the national to end up with the global, makes it hard to reach a conclusion.

Therefore, what this study addresses as the ‘Arab Culture’ is not uniform over the broad expanse of the Arab world. In general, for Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia, for example, the cultural practices are closer than those in the Arab East. Similarly, countries of Arabian Peninsula share common cultural practices different, yet related to the cultural practices shared by countries of Arab East or North Africa. Each geographical set of countries share some broad common histories and cultural features. This is the reason for selecting my writers from different regions of the Arab world, nevertheless, cultural practices still differ from country to country and within each country of the same region. Connected by the Arab

League, Language, a sense of national identity, some general cultural norms and features exist, the question of Palestine, the Western intervention, nevertheless, they have different attitudes and perspectives. There is no one Arab--‘woman, man, or culture’--even within the same society--they differ in matters of traditional practices according to national belonging, social class, educational level, religious loyalty, tribal affiliation, economic conditions, geographical location, a few to mention.

All things considered, "Identity, Politics, and Culture" demonstrates the vibrancy of Arab women's contemporary writing and culture and illuminates the types of issues that these nine particular authors have been addressing. While the aim is not to unconditionally extol these texts or their authors, it is true that the primary texts analyzed in this study are significant in that they incorporate a range of global issues that move beyond the binary liberation/patriarchy, Arab women's oppression/Western feminism, or orientalism/occidentalism dichotomies. I suggest that making Arab women's texts available in translation and teaching them in non-Arab worlds, particularly the Western and the American specifically, will encourage people to step outside their stereotypical perceptions, help them to create a space in their mind for the ‘Other’ beyond the ingrained misconceptions and images with which Arab men, women, and cultures have been generally associated with for long. I argue teaching Arab and Arab-American texts in classrooms can help in showing the commonalities between human beings and facilitate awareness of intercultural connections. It can play an essential role in bridging the gap between Arabs and non-Arabs, particularly Westerners since they can hear the stories and voices of Arabs from the perspectives of Arab and Arab-Americans themselves, particularly of women. The analyzed texts lend themselves to larger discussions on issues such as peace, political, socio-cultural

and religious dialogues, and justice and social responsibility—especially when considering the increased interest in the ‘Middle East’.

My study of the novels of Arab and Arab-American contemporary writers show that, in spite of the different national, historical, and cultural contexts that inform their texts, they all emphasize the importance of change, dialogue, and they all stress the importance for Arab societies and communities to negotiate and reconcile within their respective societies on the one hand, and with the Western world, particularly the American, on the other. It is obvious that Arabic writing of the Arab women in the Arab societies and in the US plays an important role in exposing the realities facilitating a dialogue and understanding within the Arab and Arab-American societies and communities, men and women, and between Arab women and women from no-Arabic speaking worlds.

In light of the continuing tension between the Arab World and the West, the demand for the Arab and the Arab-American written word has become immense in the present more than ever before. I suggest that the academic study of the Arab and Arab-American women’s contemporary writings can serve as a useful site for a better understanding of the realities and of Arab peoples and cultures. More importantly, teaching Arab and Arab-American literary texts, especially women’s writing, can help the mainstream American society to educate itself about the reality of Arab people(s) and culture(s), specifically about the status and role of Arab women, and lose fear of the Arab “Other”. Such self-representation can have an additional weight when it comes through the women’s voices. I contend that a better understanding may lead to a more sympathetic view of the Arab world and may rectify some Western preconceptions about Arab peoples and cultures—including the role and status of the women, who have been always stereotyped and used as a site of confrontation in the conflict

between the Arab and the Western worlds. In other words, making Arab women's literary works available to Western people can play an essential role in bringing the two worlds closer.

Moreover, the heightened interest in Arab and Arab-American cultures from a wide and eager audience, critics, and scholars would draw a special interest to the works of Arab and Arab-American writers, who can be read as spokespersons for their peoples and cultures, and whose voices become necessary in countering the negative stereotyping that Arabs have been receiving from the Western media and from large segments of the public in general since post-September 11 world. For Arab and Arab-American women, such an abundance of opportunity to voice Arab and Arab-American realities and concerns helps bring Arab and Arab-American voices into the limelight, particularly women, thus lifting the shroud of invisibility that has plagued them for the longest time.

In fact a large number of activists, scholars, audiences, and politicians in the US and other no-Arab worlds recognize the need to shake off what is often described as the average Westerner's uninformed and at best limited perspective of the rest of the world, especially of the Arab/Muslim worlds and of women specifically. This need to shatter stereotypes and narrow the gaps between the Arabs/Muslims and Western, particularly the Americans has been best manifested by Barak Obama's speech at Cairo University asserting that, "I consider it part of my responsibility as President of the United States to fight against negative stereotypes of Islam wherever it appears . . . Muslims do not fit a crude stereotype" ("Remarks", 3). To emphasize such need to chatter the stereotypes and bridge the gaps between the two worlds, Obama admits that:

[I]t is important for Western countries to avoid impeding Muslim citizens from practicing religion as they see fit--for instance, by dictating what clothes a Muslim woman should wear. We can't disguise hostility towards any religion behind the pretence of liberalism. In fact, faith should bring us together. (9)

I argue that the perceptions of Arab and Arab-American peoples and cultures can be changed as a result of showing multiple works of literature by Arab and Arab-American women in an attempt to reflect the diversity of Arab women's identities in response to the misconception that made the term 'Arab woman' evokes images of passive, and silent creatures bundled up in black robes and refusing to step into the street. It is clear that the response to the problem of (mis)representations has taken twofold—one is working simultaneously to raise awareness about the multiple realities and complex conditions that impact Arabs and Arab-Americans lives and to reveal the inadequacies and blasphemies of the Western (mis)representations of Arab men, women, and cultures.

Despite the rising number of Arab-American literary works in the last few decades, there still exists a paucity of critical material that develop methodological and theoretical approaches for the study of this field. As stated in the introduction, the scarcity of scholarly works and scholarship on contemporary Arab and Arab-American women writers has been especially challenging. Therefore, I have tried to integrate the existing scholarship about these works into my discussion whenever applicable. On a similar note, I am aware that I have, to some extent, applied Asian-American approaches in the study of the texts of the Arab-American women writers. It is my hope that with the increased interest in Arab and Arab-American literatures and cultures, and with the flourishing of Arab and Arab-American

or 'Middle Eastern' women studies, more theory-oriented works about Arab and Arab-American literatures and cultures will emerge as well. It is important to stress that the sub-theoretical frameworks as enunciated in chapter one and manifested throughout this study, have made it possible to explore and approach an understanding of the issues addressed by Arab and Arab-American women as engaging in a continual struggle for socio-economic, political reforms and cultural self-representation, not by adherence or opposition to western cultural paradigms or their Arab social traditions and political regimes, but by negotiating both, the internal and the external. It is important to note, here, that this is the first comprehensive study to incorporate all these texts and contexts or to look at them from this particular angle thematically as well as theoretically.

This study is confined to a wide range of themes addressed by contemporary Arab and Arab-American women writers and underscores the necessity of contextual research. It is an attempt to indicate a path for further research on the enriching body of Arab writings, especially recovering and reinterpreting Arab and Arab-American women's writings. Since I drew mainly on a wide range of contextual theoretical approaches from various disciplines, I have not been able to delve deeper into the postcolonial, feminist, and religious dimensions of the chosen texts. These dimensions could also explore the connections between Arab/Muslim and Arab/Muslim-American and other American ethnic groups such as Asian-Americans. Furthermore, because comparative literary and cultural studies always look for connections among diverse genres, literatures and cultures, a future study could explore different other genres.

The focus on the scholarship and teaching of the Arab and Arab-American women's writings gain importance from the timeliness of the subject. The anticipated interest in all

things Arab, particularly the status of women, can create an interest for the non-Arabs, particularly the Western to read the texts and consequently develop a better understanding of Arabs and Arab-Americans in terms of political, cultural, social, economic, and religious concerns and conditions--including the role and status of women. As I conclude this thesis in 2010, there is a need in the world today, more than ever, to break the barriers that stereotype peoples and distort cultures and religions, for human beings are all more alike than being different, and the differences should be celebrated in their own contexts as they are culturally-based. In this way, literature becomes a form of cultural negotiation and an object of inquiry both inductively and deductively--text and context are in dialogue with each other. The closer one gets to the lived realities of Arabs and Arab-Americans through their texts, the better he/she is able to see beyond stereotypes and remove the fear of the "Other". To this end, it is suggested that scholarship of any future research or study on this subject should be carried out in an ethical, contextual, and humanistic way.

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