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كلية الآداب

Borderland Arab-American Consciousness in Selected Works

by Mohja Kahf and Laila Halaby

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Introduction

Arab-American Women's position(s)

Women's status in the Arab world has been a contested zone particularly in recent decades in the West. There have been many mistaken assumptions and false perceptions about how women in the Arab Muslim world live and how they are treated by family and society at large. Despite of this, Arab-Americans and specifically Arab-American women have been rendered almost invisible in most sociological discussions of race, ethnicity and gender (Kaid 64).

Among contemporary Arab-American women writers, Mohja Kahf and Laila Halaby are two prominent figures in the canon. Mohja Kahf was born in Syria then at the age of three, she moved to the United States in 1971, following her parents who were exchange students in Utah. She grew up in a devout Muslim household which affected her presence in America. Growing up in the United States shaped her perceptions of the differences and similarities between the cultures of her home and her adopted country. On the other hand, Laila Halaby was born in Beirut, Lebanon, to a Jordanian father and an American mother. Both have been marginalized and silenced as hyphenated Arab Muslim American women who feel the need for belonging as well as the solace of community. Additionally, they face the challenge of navigating between two cultures, and the struggle to shape their own creative identity especially after 9/11. Thus, through their works, they challenge the monolithic representation of the voiceless Arab and Muslim woman victim as well as the Arab and Muslim man, by focusing on the heterogeneity of the experiences of Arab and Muslim Americans especially women in the U.S. They also forefront the inconsistent position of the Arab-

American woman within the ethnic, racial and cultural sphere in the United States. Subsequently, the novels under study portray the heterogeneous nature of the Arab-American selfhood in both character and content, emphasized by "the complexity and diversity of national origins, religions, dialects, and also personal experiences. At the same time, they insist on its Americanness" (Ghouaiel 4). To clarify, the study is informed by a theoretical framework that conceptualizes diasporic, ethnic and cultural identities as an ongoing process, transformed by daily negotiations and interactions of hybridized subjectivities. It also focuses on how Arab-American literature, mainly novels, acts as a vehicle for Arab-American women's experiences through which they are able to interrogate their commitment to both sides of the hyphen.

To specify more, the study deals with selected Arab-American literary texts that have emerged over the last decade. These works testify the experience of Arab immigrants and their descendants as "they negotiate displacement, engage with intersections of geographies, nationalities, languages, cultures, politics and identities, and claim, assert or create groundspace -- Arab, American, Arab American" (Majaj, *Transformative Acts* 1). Recently, for the first time in the history of the United States, Arab-Americans are being analyzed widely and systematically as "a discrete ethnic community integral to the coalescence of an imagined American cultural polity" (Salaita, *Arab American Literary Fictions, Cultures, and Politics* ix).

Therefore, this study focuses on how contemporary Arab-American women writers de-construct essentialized frameworks of their community's subjectivity and negotiate an Arab-American Third Space/ the mestiza/ in-between liminal space within the context of multiethnic America. *The Girl in The Tangerine Scarf*

(2006) and *Once in a Promised Land* (2007) can be regarded as narratives of "freak displacements", which focus on how cultures recognize themselves through difference within the third-space encounters of us and them (Bhabha, "The World and the Home" 145). The investigation of such liminal spaces gives Kahf and Halaby the chance to bring to light "the epistemological rifts and fractures of dominant discourses" (Borhan & Anushiravani 20). As such, it can be cogently reasoned that the study of the works written in-between cultures, as the ones grouped under the rubric of multi-ethnic literature, does not result in "a null and ideology-free zone" (Parry 65). By this, Arab-American women writers are able to voice their voiceless claims and shed light upon their existence within the American society as well as their Arab communities.

History of Arab-Americans in the U.S.:

The U.S. is considered to be one of the most diverse nations in the world. Every American can trace his or her background to some other place except for the Native Americans. It is regarded as "a nation of nations and a microcosm of the world that is based primarily on pluralism" (Afridi 10). However, over the years, the United States government created "various regulations and immigration laws to control who can visit, work, study and above all become a U.S. citizen" (Ameri 136). Though it has a long and celebrated history of successfully integrating various immigrant groups, it has an equally long history of exclusions, denying full membership to various groups. Arab and Muslim Americans are the most recent recipients of a long American tradition of publicly supported and institutionally sanctioned moral exclusion, enacted through legalized and institutionalized discrimination and followed by "a massive unleashing of social prejudice, media stereotypes, and public hysteria" (Sirine & Fine 76). As one of

the most controversial minorities in America, Arab-Americans trace their ancestral roots to several Arab and Middle Eastern countries.

Despite their long establishment in the U.S., they are widely perceived as "an immigrant population, an image that American-born Arabs often despise" (Shyrock & Lin 39). Such perceptions paint all Arabs in the U.S. as aliens. In spite of this, Arab-Americans have a common sense of history, language, and cultural heritage. They are bounded by an Arab identity that is based on a common language and some shared traditions. America is identified as a nation of immigrants, a pluralistic society following a compromise strategy that tends to equate between various ethnic minorities within it, until recently, Arab-Americans have been left on the margins and have been effectively erased from "the multicultural tapestry of America" (Saliba, "Resisting Invisibility" 308-9). Edward Said describes Arabs in America as "particularly the only ethnic group […] whom in the West racial slurs are tolerated, even encouraged" (*The Question of Palestine* 26).

This dominant racist U.S. discourse fuses the two categories of "Arab" and "Muslim" assuming that all Arabs are Muslim, all Muslims are Arab, thus all Muslim Arabs are put within the category of the terrorist and national threat. Additionally, this obscures the existence of Arabs:

> [W]ho are not Muslim (including, but not limited to, Christians and Jews) and Muslims who are not Arab (including Indonesians, Malaysians, Chinese, South Asians, Africans, African Americans, and Latinos/as). It also erases the historic and vast ethnic communities who are neither Arab nor Muslim but who live and interact with a majority of Arabs or Muslims (such as Greeks in

> Egypt; Armenians in Palestine; Roma in Jordan; Kurds in Iraq, Turkey, and Iran; and Imazighen in North Africa, to name a few). (Abdulhadi, Rabab et al., *Arab and Arab American Feminisms* xxiii)

It was remarked by a prominent American historian that "to Americans, the Arabs are people who lived outside of history" (qtd. in Suleiman, "The Arab Immigrant Experience" 1). From the moment of their arrival in America, as immigrants, they had to "combat identity-related confusion, starting with the perplexing problem of labeling and being labeled continuing with the transformation from an immigrant to an ethnic to a member of an ethnic group in this complex pluralistic society" (Darvas 19). Thus, as an immigrant community, they faced the dilemma of being suspended between different worlds and between two cultures as well. They resorted not only to create their distinctive cultures from which they derived their new identities; but also they constructed an immigrant ethnic community from which these new identities could be validated and articulated.

Moreover, Arab-Americans identify themselves not according to their country of origin but as permanent citizens in the U.S. Many people believe that Arabs are new to the United States, but historians have made it clear that Arabs arrived to the United States hundreds of years ago. One fact about the Arab existence on American soil was that "as early as the 15th Century, Spanish explorers brought slaves from the Arab world to the Americas" (Sarnou, "An overview of Arab Anglophone Literature"). It has been considered by some historians that "the first Arabic speaker came to North America was called Zammouri from Morocco in 1528, who arrived as a slave" (Ameri 24). It is difficult to estimate the number of slaves who came from current Arab countries but "there are records of Arabic

speaking Muslim slaves arriv[ing] in 1717" (26). During the late 1700s, these Arabs living in the United States were treated according to the laws governing whites.

It is worth noting that over the years, the immigration officials classified people according to physical characteristics, religion and national origins. Apparently, the immigration of Arabs to the United States can be divided into three major waves. The first wave of Arab immigration extended from the 1800s to 1924, it was called the Great Migration. In this period, there were various voices who tried to put an end to the immigration of Arabs to America claiming that they were un-American, with their cultures that did not fit well with American culture. As a consequence, a series of laws passed by "the U.S. Congress in 1917, 1921, and 1924, slowed down immigration from the Arab world" (Sarnou, "An overview of Arab Anglophone Literature").

The Immigration of Arabs to the U.S. from the First World War To the Present Time:

It was evident that from then until the First World War, those immigrants were mostly sojourners believing that they were temporarily away from home; that is why they had minimal involvement in the American society or its body politic. During this period, as a community, Arab-Americans referred to themselves "as *Al Nizala*, a term used to refer to their status, as it means a temporary settlement" (Suleiman, "The Arab Immigrant Experience" 6). Hence, these Arab immigrants found America an unwelcome land having no right to naturalization and citizenship because they did not belong to the white race, which traumatized them as an Arabic-speaking community. Most of them came from Great Syria and was

overwhelmingly Christian sharing a communal solidarity towards their country of origin. Syrians were the only acceptable people for U.S. citizenship as they found that their roots ensured them "Caucasian racial status" (7).

However, the First World War was a watershed event for Arabs in America cutting them off from their homeland. After the First World War, the restrictive quota systems were introduced in the United States; practically cutting off emigration from Arab regions. These changes intensified the sense of isolation and separation as a community. Also, they became more assimilated and thus acculturated; they worked harder for a better image of themselves and their people in their old homeland. They clearly realized that they were part of the American society and became fully implanted Americans. Besides, they exerted more efforts on campaigning to inform Americans about their Arab heritage. Suleiman stresses that "after World War I, the Arabs in the United States became truly an Arab *American* community" ("Arab Americans and the Political Process" 43; italics in original). It started to be identified as a specific community that shared cultural characteristics. As many of Arab-Americans sought a return to their Arab homelands, they realized that there was no going back home again and conversely at the same time, they did not regard America as their permanent home.

This is why, till the end of the 19th century, when Arabs arrived in the U.S, "America was not only unsure what it meant to be Arab, America at that time started to ask what it meant to be black. Color and ethnicity had always been an issue of debate in U.S. legislature" (Schmidt 177). However, from then until the Second World War, Arab immigrants in the U.S. went through a process of assimilation as well as stabilization. Actually, the Arab community's fusion in the

American society witnessed “a weakening or near extinction of Arab ethnicity” (Suleiman, “Arab Americans and the Political Process” 45).

In Post-World War II, America witnessed a much more diverse Arab immigration which came from the entire Arab world and were both Christian and Muslim. They were marked differently from the earlier arrivals. These immigrants were of a higher level of education and social status which gave them more confidence to participate in American politics as soon as they arrived to the new homeland. They came as immigrants who sought to start a new life in America and they were frustrated by the instability back home as well. However, for them, it took a while to be able to enter the U.S. political life mainly as a result of the 1967 and the consequent Arab military disaster. Before the 1967 war, as Suleiman stated that “the political identity of the Arab community was for all intents and purposes wholly American, i.e not even hyphenated” (45).

Arab-Americans’ identity has been shaped by many factors but particularly by the ongoing interactions between the old Arab home and the new American home as well as their perception of themselves with regard to the various locations they inhabit. As a result of their inclusion and marginalization, they faced racial and in-group divisions that led to a fragmentation or disintegration from within the American society itself. However, Arabs dwelling in America learned to think of themselves as Arab-American, or white, or racially “other”, people of diverse national, religious, socioeconomic, and linguistic backgrounds. Using these identity labels not only makes sense to millions of Americans but also is a proof of their Americanization. It is worth noting that 9/11 and its aftermath exposed “the precariousness of citizenship status for all people of color, immigrants and

non-immigrants alike" (Ahmad 339). The U.S. War on Terror has led to the growing interest in Arab communities in America.

Arab-American Literature:

Arab-American literature has unique and distinct characteristics which distinguish it from the literature of writers who write in the Arab world. One reason behind this distinctiveness could be the fact of being dislocated from home. Writing from a space that is away from one's home and being displaced "geographically and sometimes ideologically may be two major causes of the uniqueness of Anglophone Arab literature" that is produced by immigrant Arab writers or hyphenated Arab writers (Sarnou, "An overview of Arab Anglophone Literature"). As a matter of fact, their dislocation provided them with a position that is specific to them: it is the margin, the border or the threshold that joins and separates the two spaces (home vs. diaspora/ Arab vs. American) at the same time. Indeed, 9/11 events brought recognition and attention to 'Arabs' as an ethnic group and their visibility as a threat. The sudden shift from near invisibility to widespread interest in Arabs and Arab culture represented a heavy burden for Arab-American writers who needed not only to absorb these changes but also to display solidarity with the two sides of their identity.

Although Arab-American literature has been in existence in the U.S. for over a century, it has only recently begun to be recognized as part of the ethnic landscape of literary America. This literary blossoming reflects in part the shifting historical, social, and political contexts that have pushed Arab-Americans to the foreground, creating both new spaces for their voices and new urgencies of expression, as well as the flourishing creativity of these writers. Actually, Arab-

American literature has witnessed a breathtaking thrive in the past two and half decades, from the 1970s until the present day. Arab-American literature is "a burgeoning field struggling to carve a space of its own within the mosaic of America's ethnic literary scene" (Ghouaiel 1). Its tradition dates back to the beginning of the 20th century with the arrival of early Arab émigré writers. This literary genre has been shaped by the different phases it has gone through, together with the varied circumstances and historical events which have affected its course. Arab-American literature mirrors "the historical, social and political development of the American communities with Arab descent in the United States" (1).

Apparently, prior to the Gulf wars and 9/11 Attacks, Arab-American literature remained "less understood", mainly because it was not given much attention in American academic circles (Read 1). Unquestionably, the relative absence of Arab-American literary studies from ethnic canon suggests that Arab-American literature discourse is placed into the state of "discourse invisibility" which is considered "an ethnic marker" (Abdulrahim 128). The development of Arab-American literature mirrors the patterns of Arab-American history, and the changing contexts that pushed Arab-American writers into creating new spaces to make their voices heard and represent their oppressed marginalized identities.

Thus, Arab-American literature is seen along the lines of the three phases of Arab immigration to America: from 1880 to 1924; after World War II; and from 1967 to the present. The third major stage witnessed the rise of many female Arab-American literary voices in all genres as: Lisa Suhair Majaj, Elmaz Abinader, Nathalie Handal, Naomi Shihab Nye, Mohja Kahf, Suhair Hammad, Patricia Sarrafian Ward, Kathryn Abdul-Baki, Laila Halaby, Frances Khairallah

Noble, Mona Simpson, Samia Serageldin, Diana Abu-Jaber, Heather Raffo, Betty Shamieh and others. They have contributed to "unveiling the intersectionality of religion, ideological affiliations, class, gender, nationality, identity and diaspora in the works of Arab writers" (Awad 11). They have also highlighted the heterogeneity and diversity of Arab women in a way that shatters the stereotypical and homogeneous images that depict them as helpless and passive victims of a relentless Arab and Muslim patriarchy especially that propagandized in America. Moreover, they tend to employ literary strategies to resist stereotypes and misconceptions about Arab communities in American popular culture. This group of writers represent a minority group with a convergent home—the Middle East—and common cultural identity, that of Arab origins. Overall, they struggle to portray positive images of Arabs and Muslims while negotiating their unstable identity.

As will be exemplified in the different chapters of this study, the complexity of the Arab-American experience is mirrored in the literary production of the members of the community. Instead of being labeled exclusively either Arab or American, Arab-American literature occupies an in-between space between both worlds. It is a hybrid genre standing right at the hyphen as it borrows from both literary traditions in order to shape its own perspective. It displays thematic links and similarities with multiethnic literatures in the United States dealing with racism, discrimination and exclusion. It is seen as a production of Arab-American writers who are Americans as well as descendants of Arabs who seek to "re-locate themselves [within] the mainstream culture on the one hand and within their homes of origins on the other hand, experiencing a state of in-between-ness

and [an] emotional borderland" (Sarnou, "An overview of Arab Anglophone Literature").

Therefore, while this project intends to delineate the transnational connections of this literature to the Arab world, it also aims to contribute to the efforts to "carve out a space for Arab-American literature in the U.S. literary canon" (Ghouaiel 4). Trying to find a space of its own within the context of multiethnic America, Arab-American literature has been analyzed according to many theoretical concepts as this is the case of other minority literatures. In light of this, the use of Gloria Anzaldúa's theory of borderlands (her creation of la mestiza) in addition to Homi Bhabha's concept of the Third Space are utilized to portray Arab-American subjectivity, which is multifaceted and always in flux within the Arab-American experience.

Third Wave Feminism and Arab-American Women:

Third Wave feminism is a philosophy that emerged relatively in the 1990s. It is "a diffuse movement without a central goal, and as such, there's no single piece of legislation or major social change that belongs to the third wave" (Grady). Like previous feminisms, the Third Wave focuses on the economic, political, social, and personal empowerment of women; it views women as survivors and not as victims. This newer form of feminism, however, focuses more on the individual empowerment of women and less on activism. It celebrates women's journeys to build meaningful identities in the complex contemporary world. It also fosters women to explore their sexuality, celebrate their diversity and stress on their emotions and experience that were traditionally labelled as unfeminine thus these third wave women are characterized as Generation X and Generation Y (Catford,