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Cultural Impasse in Arab-American Writings: A Reading of Laila
Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* and Mohja Kahf's *the Girl in the
Tangerine Scarf*.

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DEDICATIONS

To the voiceless women in Diaspora.

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Abstract:

The object of this dissertation is to study Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* and Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in The Tangerine Scarf*. I intend to analyze the diasporic experiences of Arab American women: Khadra Shamy and Salwa Haddad. I will also analyze the characters conditions as Diasporic subjects. My main argument is a comment on how diasporic experiences are varied, a fact that makes Western prejudices and stereotypes invalid, and I also show how these women are able to deal with their sense of displacement, working as mediators between Arab and American cultures. In order to carry on such a project, I will investigate each character's experiences and their different ways of dealing with their diasporic conditions.

Key Words: Arab- American. Women. Diaspora. Arab- Muslim Women. 9/11.

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INTRODUCTION

Sometimes it can all make you crazy because you can't get out. I have so many worlds, and every world is a whole other world. But in your mind they're totally separated, but then they're all there in your mind together. You get to a point that you are about to explode.

—From an interview by a Middle Eastern female on identity. (Naber, 2006)

1-Backgraoud of the Study

Arab Women as migrants in the West have been the subject of research of many scholars. Those researches work as the background of understanding the question of Arab women identities in this research paper. In order to know how Arab women immigrants negotiate their diasporic identities, it is crucial to know how they define themselves and how they are being defined by others¹. Arabs and Muslims particularly migrated to Europe and America in the twentieth century but the rate of these migrations rose after the World War II. The prejudices against migrant Arabs and Muslims existed way before the 9/11 incident and there exists even a term in cultural studies that cover this peculiar experience as “Islamophobia” and This last implies “dread or hatred of Islam — and, therefore to fear and dislike all or most Muslims.”² The focus of this paper is on Arab women who have been struggling to create their identity. In negotiating their identities, Arab Women migrants show an “imposed identity” and they become what they are not. In Diaspora, these female migrants are empowered by the freedom they enjoy in the West ,mainly the US to address the past, recreate their position in the community, and redefine their relationship to "traditional values and reputations" including religion and family reputation. Diasporic religious women are in many ways caught between oppressive patriarchal societies and imperialisms that victimize them, silence their voices and marginalize them. In an effort to understand how Arab women reconstruct identity in Diaspora, this research paper draws upon Diasporic theories and feminist theories through the analysis of two major novel written by Arab migrated women themselves, depicting the struggle of Arab women in Diaspora.

¹ Husain, Sarah, ed. "Voices of Resistance: Muslim Women on War, Faith & Sexuality». Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2007.p 1.

² MacFarquhar, Neil. "She Carries Weapons; They are Called Words». *The New York Times*. <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/12/books/12veil.html> 12 May 2007.

Diasporas are deeply gendered, thus women's expressions of displacement and exile from their homes cannot be equated to those of men³. Dislocation from home can have different effects on both genders. Feminist researchers tend to give equal weight to women's experiences and their interpretations of those experiences. However, for too long feminist studies of women's lives and subjectivities have privileged a Western, liberal, and secular construction of womanhood⁴. As Lila Abu-Lughod and others have argued, a feminist methodology employed to understand women on their terms has been tinged with imperial overtones, casting religious third world women as victims in need of saving⁵.

This background of Arab women immigrants in the United States is well reflected in Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in The Tangerine Scarf* (2006) and Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* (2007). In order to understand the novels in light of diaspora theories, one must know about the authors and the content of the novels. Mohja Kahf was born in Damascus, Syria in 1967. She is a Syrian-American poet and novelist. She grew up in the Midwest after the immigration of her family to the United States in 1971. She has a PhD in comparative literature from Rutgers University and is currently a professor of English at the University of Arkansas. She is the author of the poetry collection *Emails from Scheherazade* (2003) and the novel *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006). Kahf's perceptions of the differences and similitude between her homeland and the host country stem from her growing up in the United States. Her poetry is a mixture of both Syrian and American predominance. Kahf sometimes criticizes the many

³ Donna Gabaccia, *From the Other Side: Women, Gender, and Immigrant Life in the U.S., 1820-1990*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994, p.304

⁴ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, eds., Chandra Mohanty, Ann Russo and Lourdes Torres, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991, p.335.

⁵ Lila Abu-Lughod, "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?: Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and its Others". *American Anthropologist* . 104, No. 3, vol. 8 (2002), p.787

assigned stereotypes about Muslim women by tackling hairstyles, sex, and clothing. In *Emails from Scheherazade*, she constructs empowered women who are not afraid of standing out and claiming their difference. Kahf has also tackled the burden of immigration in *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* by depicting a Muslim girl's identity formation in Indiana. Kahf is a columnist for the website: "Muslim Wake Up". Her nonfiction work includes "*Western Representation of the Muslim Woman: From Termagant to Odalisque* (1999)"⁶.

Similarly, Leila Halaby was born in Lebanon to a Jordanian father and an American mother, Halaby went to the United States in the 1960s, when she was still a baby. Years later, she returned to Jordan to study folklore for a year, and then moved back to Arizona. Not considering herself an Arab-American, since, according to her, she is Arab *and* American. This experience of living between two cultures allowed Halaby to transfer all her awareness of this peculiar state onto her novels, translated into the sense of displacement in several of her characters. Halaby writes poetry, children's fiction and she has written two novels so far: *West of the Jordan*, published in 2003 and *Once in a Promised Land* (2007), which tells the story of a couple who left Jordan to live in Arizona, and needs to cope with the constant paranoia against Arabs in the U.S.⁷

2 Statement of the problem

The attacks of September 11, 2001 on the World Trade Centre had many results on Arabs and Arab Muslims. Western media portrayed Arabs and Muslims as backward people. Consequently, this led to "Othering" Muslim and Arab migrants who are migrated to western countries. 9/11 helped to spread a belief that Arab and Arab Muslim migrants are people who

⁶ Poetry Foundation. com, "Mohja Kahf biography" <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poets/detail/mohja-kahf>. Access on 2017

⁷Halaby,Laila."Bio". <http://lailahalaby.net/bio/>. Accessed in 2017

cannot be trusted. In Western countries, migrants are being criticized and attacked and regarded as dangerous suicide bombers and Taliban supporters⁸.

The depiction of Arabs and Arab Muslims in literature by Occidentals is problematic⁹. Edward Said criticizes the way the west have presented the Orientals. He writes "It is Europe that articulates the Orient; this articulation is prerogative, not a puppet master, but of a genuine creator, whose life-giving power represents, animates, constitutes the otherwise silent and dangerous space beyond familiar boundaries"¹⁰. The West accepts novels that have a western feminist agenda in objecting to patriarchal structures of Islam; one means novels that depicts Arab and Muslim women as victims of the patriarchal rules of Islam. Yet, contemporary novels produced by female Arab and Arab Muslim authors provide a new way of thinking and decolonized minds by being socially conscious and politically engaged in debates about their societies.

Taking the attacks of September 11, 2001 on the World Trade Center in New York as a background, this dissertation aims to investigate how post-9/11 novels depict Arab Women subjecthood as immigrants. It will examine how in Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine scarf* and Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* female migrants from a Muslim background negotiate their identities in a hostland, the US in particular.

3-The Objective of the Study

Do all Arab women have the same experience as immigrants? Does religion determine an Arab's migrant experience? Does the culture of the homeland plays a role in shaping an Arab women's diasporic identity? The primary objective of this paper is to analyze the different ways

⁸ Hillel Frisch and Ephraim Inbar, Edt "*Radical Islam and International Security Challenges and Responses* New York. London: Rutledge, 2008.p 374

⁹ Graham E Fuller, "*A World without Islam* ".New York. London , Boston: Back Bay Books, 2010.p 157

¹⁰ Edward Said, *Orientalism*", London: Rutledge 1979 p.57.

Arab women migrants negotiate their Identities as depicted in the novels of Mohja Kahf and Laila Halaby. The aim of this dissertation is to challenge prejudices on Arab women immigrants because the fictional characters of these novels show that immigration experience differs from one woman to another. It will also investigate whether these women view themselves as Arabs or American. Concepts like Diaspora, Third Space and hybridity by Homi Bhabha will be used as framework to show how migrants construct their identities by living between two different worlds.

Through the analysis of the two novels, I tend to open up new element on diasporic experience among Arab women immigrants by changing the stereotypical notion that those women have the same experience. Therefore, this research will use sociological and political studies approaches to explore anxieties faced by the female characters of the novels as representatives of Arab women. Although this dissertation is a literary analysis, it seeks to explore political, sociological and psychological elements affecting Arab women's negotiation of their identities in a context of immigration.

4-The Scope of the Study

This research will look at the different experiences faced by Arab women immigrants with reference to literary texts written by two Arab women writers who are migrants themselves. It will strengthen the notion that they neither belong to the mainstream culture of the hostland nor that of their homelands. It aims to show that the "Third-Space is multi-dimensional in view of the fact that it varies from different Arab immigrants and that all migrants do not go through the same feelings"¹¹. Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in The Tangerine Scarf* (2003) and Leila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* (2007) are suitable literary texts for study in this research as they help to

¹¹ Wail S Hassan, *Immigrant Narratives : Orientalism and Cultural Translation in Arab American and Arab British Literature*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.p 6

better understand the conflict faced by Arab Women immigrants. The choice of these two novels will give different depictions of migrants negotiating their identities. In the novel of Mohja Kahf, readers are presented with cultural and Islamic background among almost all immigrants. In contrast, Laila Halaby presents characters that are liberal, that is not practicing Muslims.

Identity of female characters will be analyzed in both novels. Furthermore, I will also examine common themes in both texts and the different ways they are addressed within diasporic studies. The research aims also to uncover some of major issues in the lives of Arab women immigrants.

5-The Literature Review

Before analyzing how immigrants negotiate their identities in *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* and *Once in a Promised Land*, it is important to know that these novels have previously been examined. Compared to *Once in a Promised Land*, there are more reviews on *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*. There are quite a number of scholarly articles on Mohja Kahf's novel .On the other hand, Laila Halaby's novel has not been given the same attention and there are few reviews. Barbara J. Hampton argues that an examination of the themes of community, gender, and identity in the two novels can relieve the worst of our anxieties. The characters of these novels have drunk deeply at the well of personal choice, so central to American values and freedom¹². The discussion of the novels is grounded in recent sociological data that point to the same reality. A “religious reading” of these texts should lead us not only to be open to hearing these “previously unheard voices” but also to be more open to risking Christian engagement with our Muslim neighbors."

¹² Hampton Barbara, " Free to be Muslim-Americans: Community, Gender, and Identity in *Once in a Promised Land*, *The Taqwacores*, and *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*" Christian Scholar Review.p.245

Danielle Haque argues that Mohja Kahf is trying to fill the gap between the two sides and clarify the position of Muslims to Non-Muslims, says that:

Kahf seeks not only to normalize Muslims to a non-Muslim audience; she also addresses the realities and concerns of many Muslim Americans through her characters' struggles with practice, belief, and acculturation. She does so through a literary form fraught with connections to the development of the modern nation-state and the liberal secular subject. Nevertheless, it is also a form that represents a sense of order in a chaotic world. The form itself serves as a response to the exploitation of the memoir and novels of formation that cast Muslim women as pitiable victims who can (with help and backbone) achieve agency, insofar as Kahf reconfigures the plot and protagonist to depart from well-worn stereotypes of Muslim women¹³.

As it is the case of the American society presented in the novel, Americans tend to lump all women from Muslim countries into the Arab category to view all Arabs as Muslims and to consider all Muslims as practicing a fanatic version of Islam. Kahf throughout her novels presents the confluences of ethnic and religious identity as well as the western image toward Arab women whether a Muslim or not as passive victims.

Steven Salaita devotes a whole chapter on "Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* under the title: "Exploring Islam(s) in America "examining a range of spiritual and doctrinal aspects of Islam, and" Laila Halaby: *Promised Lands and Unfulfilled Promises*"¹⁴. Carine Pereira Marques on the other hand, examines the themes of gender and migration in relation to *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*. She argues that the novel of Mohja Kahf shows how after migration the position of women in diaspora undergoes transformation. She argues that "in Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, the main character negotiates her subjectivity in the space of diaspora, which is illustrated mainly, among other things, through her choice of clothes "¹⁵.

¹³ Danielle Haque; "The Postsecular Turn and Muslim American Literature" *American Literature*, Volume 86, Number 4, Press .2014 p.808

¹⁴ Steven Salaita, *Modern Arab American Fiction: A Reader's Guide* (Syracuse University Press, 2011), p.43-79

¹⁵ Marques P. Carine "Mohja Kahf's: *The Girl In The Tangerine Scarf* Seen Through The Hijab Perspective" *Estudos Anglo-Americanos*, no. 37 (2012), p. 177

Mudasir Altaf also investigates how Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* as a novel has often been accused of reinforcing rather than challenging stereotypes, of cultural otherness. Her main argument is that the major concern of Halaby is not the destabilization of stereotypes but the celebration of the potential for adaptation in both individuals and societies. She emphasizes that Halaby employs stereotypes as "counterpoints in order to further emphasize her protagonist's final integration into contemporary American society"¹⁶, and how Jassim and Salwa inspite of relinquishing all forms of transnational political engagement and building their image in implicit compliance with the assimilative criteria that guarantee the good Arab American label were victims of suspicion and downright racism. So the paper will explore how the novel goes beyond representing the consequences on Arabs in the post-9/11 America, and skillfully investigates the psychological, social, political and economic dimensions of the experiences of Arab Americans by questioning their belonging.

¹⁶ Mudasir Altaf Bhat, "Broken Promises in a 'Promised Land': Race and Citizenship after 9/11 in Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land*," *Asian Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies* 2, no. 7 (2014): p106.

CHAPTER I

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

People who live at the margins of categories provide an especially valuable starting point for exploring all the ways that identity can be deconstructed or reconstructed.

Mary Coombs

Introduction

Arab- American communities become prominent after the event of 9/11. Those communities were lacking attention before that period, without any space to speak out their problems and concerns. This minority was invisible within the American society which substantially limited them from any engagement with American society. This situation led some Arab-Americans to show their Arabness and a position in society as Arab-American citizens especially among women¹⁷. Their absence and marginalization has characterized many Arab- American and Muslim women in the West before and after 9/11. Therese Saliba, an Arab- American scholar, discusses the Western representation of Arab women ,she says:

The first, a literal absence, when the Arab woman is not present or is entirely missing from the scene; the second, a symbolic absence, when she is present but only for the purpose of representing her invisibility or silence in order to serve as a subordinate to the Western subject of the scene. She is also granted moments of presence when her actions and speech are manipulated and exploited to serve the interests of her Western interpreters. In all these instances, the *absent* Arab woman is objectified and contrasted to the 'liberated' Western woman, who often serves as a representative for Arab women. The white woman is granted agency to speak for Arab women, usually on behalf of their liberation¹⁸.

Arab-American literature began to thrive in the 1990s, having female authors as its main representatives. Ludescher states that two factors can effect to the development of Arab-American female literature. According to her, "the first was the search for voices outside the traditional canon of male literature The second factor, like so many things in the Arab American community, was political"¹⁹. Because of the second factor, Arab-American women writers faced the wrong representations and stereotypes of their own communities in the west.

¹⁷ Abdelrazek Amal Talaat, *Contemporary Arab American Women Writers : Hyphenated Identities and Border Crossings* Youngstown, New York: Cambria press, 2007.p.4

¹⁸ Saliba, Therese. "Military Presences and Absences: Arab Women and the Persian Gulf War." *Food for Our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab American and Arab Canadian Feminists*.Ed. Joanna Kadi. Boston: South End Press, 1994,P.125

¹⁹ Ludescher, Tanyss. "From Nostalgia to Critique: An Overview of Arab-American Literature." *MELUS* 31.4 (2006): P 106

This led them to show interest in reconstructing their identities especially after the increased interest on the Arab American literature after the 11th September 2001.

Ludescher deals with the main question that these writers have to answer: “Should Arab American writers focus on the Arab side of experience, emphasizing the traditions and values of the Arab world, or should they focus on the American side of experience, emphasizing American immigrant experience in the context of multiculturalism?”²⁰. Therefore, the main issue facing Arab-Americans is related to constructing identities. Another issue that Arab-American women writers need to face is related to the social and ethnic status that members of this ethnic group play or have played in the American society²¹. Lisa Suhair Majaj states that Arab Americans are not prevented from prejudices and stereotypes despite the fact that they are considered white. According to Majaj, “Arab-Americans currently are officially classified as white, this classification although seeming to grant inclusion in mainstream American society is ambiguous. Classification as “white” means that Arab-American experiences of racism and discrimination often go unaddressed on the basis that „white“ people cannot suffer racism ”²². As a result, Arab Americans are suffering from racism and exclusion in the west.

Because of this status of Arab-Americans in the United States, Arab-American writers address in their works these identity issues. Through their writings, they speak out the diversity of diasporic experiences and their ideas; desires, emotions, and strategies of survival²³. Gregory Orfalea highlights the importance of Arab-American writers to improve of their situation

According to him:

²⁰ Ibid.p 106

²¹ Ibid.p106

²² Majaj, Lisa Suhair. “Arab-American Ethnicity: Locations, Coalitions, and Cultural Negotiations.” *Arabs in America: Building a New Future*. Ed. Michael W.Suleiman. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1999.p .321

²³ Gaby Semaan, “Arab Americans: Stereotypes, Conflict, History, Cultural Identity and Post 9/11,” *Intercultural Communication Studies XXIII*., no. 2 (2014),p.24

Arab American fiction is making fascinating strides. The voice of people who bear the burden of a unique history in the United States is becoming more confident. It is confident enough . . . to create a strong, at times joyful, more often agonizing linkage to the Arab world. And this is no surprise. With American warships and armies splayed out across the entire Middle East hunting for the elusive Fountain of Terror – a complete reversal of those adventurers who came to the New World for the Fountain of Youth – we have something to say, something to get across that matters, something to stand for. It is called humanness. In any case, there has been no value – and a great deal of harm – in letting others say it for us.²⁴

In this context, Arab American women writers define and experience a hybrid identity in a great work of literary value. Among these authors the works presented in this research paper, Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in The Tangerine Scarf* and Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* are two major contributions to Diaspora Literature. The novels deal with immigrant Arab Americans dealing with the conflict between two cultures, the need for assimilation and the fear of loss the authentic self.

1-Ethnic, Cultural Identity and Diaspora

I find it necessary to highlight some concepts that support my work. First of all, I will define Diaspora. The term “Diaspora” is “etymologically derived from the Greek term *Diasperien*, from dia –, “across” and – sperien, “to sow or scatter seeds”²⁵. Therefore, Diaspora refers to groups of people who were “dislocated from their native homeland through the movements of migration, immigration, or exile”²⁶ Diaspora, thus, is always related to dislocation from one place to another. It is fictionally represented in several contemporary Arab American literary works, such as the novels presented in this paper²⁷.

²⁴ Orfalea, Gregory. “The Arab American Novel.” *MELUS* 31.4 (2006),p.132

²⁵ Braziel, Jana Evans, and Anita Mannur. *Theorizing Diaspora: A Reader*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005.p1

²⁶ Ibid, p 1.

²⁷ Nassima, Benqayed « hyphenated ARab American Women » 2011.P 17

James Clifford, one of the most important theorists of Diaspora, states that characteristics of diaspora are: “a history of dispersal, myths/memories of the homeland, alienation in the host country, desire for eventual return, ongoing support of the homeland, and a collective identity importantly defined by this relationship”²⁸. Those characteristics help us to define the main characters of the two novels as diasporic subjects. In *Once in a Promised Land*, and *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, the portrayed diaspora community, which has Khadra and Salwa as its main representatives shares a collective identity.

As Clifford states, diasporic subjects are affected by its negative and positive sides.

According to him

"Diaspora consciousness is constituted both negatively and positively. It is constituted negatively by experiences of discrimination and exclusion. The barriers facing racialized sojourners are often reinforced by socioeconomic constraints. . . . Diaspora consciousness is produced positively through identification with world historical cultural/political forces. The process may not be as much about being African . . . or wherever one has settled, differently. It is also about feeling global." ²⁹

Both theories of Clifford and Braziel and Mannur presuppose that Diaspora has its pros and cons, which can be seen in both novels. The characters lose connection with their homelands, and their ties with traditions, but they also gain connection with the host culture. The ways in which the characters deal with both cultures are, according to Braziel and Mannur, different from one another. Therefore, in analyzing diasporic subjects, we must consider their experiences are always diverse even within a same diasporic group.

Another theorist that deals with Diaspora is Stuart Hall. He sheds light on important issues that are common to ethnic groups. He argues that “identity” is a production that is always

²⁸ Clifford, James. “Diasporas.” *Migration, Diasporas and Transnationalism*. Ed. Steven Vertovec and Robin Cohen. Northampton: Edward Elgar, 1999.p. 215

²⁹ Clifford, James. “Diasporas.” *Migration, Diasporas and Transnationalism*. Ed. Steven Vertovec and Robin Cohen. Northampton: Edward Elgar, 1999.p 224

in process and is never stable³⁰, and he points out two different concepts for “cultural identity”. The first concept is related to the idea of an ethnic group sharing many similarities, such cultural traditions. As Hall states, "this conception of cultural identity “provides us, as one people”, with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history”³¹.

Hall explains the second concept of cultural identity. According to him, "this position admits the presence of similarities shared by a group, but it goes beyond that, focusing on the changes that individuals undergo, which are not fixed only in a common past, but “constitute „what we really are“, or rather – since history has intervened – „what we have become“. We cannot speak for very long, with any exactness, about „one experience, one identity“ without acknowledging its other side – the ruptures and discontinuities which constitute the Caribbean’s „uniqueness“”.³²The "Caribbean uniqueness“ about which he writes can be generalized with other groups, such as the Arab, as it is the case here, to show that one cannot write about an “Arabness” and cannot consider that all Arab people experience the same identity³³.

Hall presented those two different concepts of cultural identity to understand how the women characters experience the Diaspora in Halaby's *Once in A Promised Land* and *The Girl with The Tangerine Scarf*". The second concept is exactly related to what happened in the novels: "the experience of Diaspora is marked by what the characters "*become*", rather than by what the characters "*are*". The ways in which they construct their experiences are more marked by different positions than by anything else"³⁴, as Hall defines it, "the construction of one's

³⁰ Hall, Stuart, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora.” *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*. Ed. Jonathan Rutherford. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990.p 234

³¹ Ibid.p.234

³² Ibid p 236

³³ Also mentioned by Nassima Kaid p 20 P 21

³⁴ Ibid p. 236

identity is influenced by the ways that each individual relates and re-reads the past common experiences".³⁵

2-Gender and Diaspora (Migrated Arab Women)

It is important to highlight some concepts about the relation between Diaspora and gender. Susan Stanford Friedman analyzes how Diaspora and gender interact and influence each other. Friedman proposes that "figures identity as a historically embedded site, a positionality, a location, a standpoint, a terrain, an intersection, a network, a crossroads of multiply situated knowledge"³⁶. Friedman, defines identity that it is a matter of one's position and location in cultural formations, such as race, gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality.

Friedman puts it as "the self is not singular, it is multiple. The location it occupies contains many positions within it, each of which may well depend on its interaction with the others for its particular inflection . . . the constituents of identity emerge from a succession of categories"³⁷. In this dissertation, I intend to analyze the characters in relation the situations lived by them, their environment, and also their relations with other characters.

Susan Friedman wrote about the relevance of gender and states that "gender particularly the experience of women – is the flashpoint of complexity, exploding at every step reductionist readings of the new migration"³⁸. The portrayals of the female figure that are represented in contemporary women's writing have a great deal to understand Diaspora. And how the Arab women migrant are welcome by the host communities. She explains that women are still victims of violence which is involved in Diaspora issues that is fundamental to understand:

³⁵ Ibid P 236

³⁶ Friedman, Susan Stanford. "Bodies on the Move: A Poetics of Home and Diaspora." *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 23.2 (2004): p .19

³⁷ Ibid p .21

³⁸ Friedman, Susan Stanford. "„The New Migration“: Clashes, Connections, and Diasporic Women's Writing." *Contemporary Women's Writing* 3.1 (2009): p.23.

The differently situated narratives of these [contemporary women] writers posit the centrality of violence – especially violence against the female body and spirit – as core elements of migration's turbulence. They suggest that the displacement of diaspora begins *before* the journey from home to elsewhere, begins indeed within the home and homeland and travels with the women as they face the difficulties of negotiating between new ways and old ways of living. (23)³⁹

As it is suggested by Friedman women need to recreate their position and to reconsider what it means to be a woman in a completely different place. As my study focuses in a greater depth on this area of the representation of Arab Women that has not been fully addressed. Moreover, Mohja Kahf is an author whose wider work is not restricted to the area of diasporic Muslim women, a point she has made clear by publishing the novel *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, set in and around the U.S, whereas her prior novel characterized American Muslim identity. I have also privileged Halaby because she writes in the spirit of transcultural feminism. As the dissertation reveals, my choices of Kahf and Halaby were not guided by location but by issues of theme.

Floya Anthias also highlights the importance of gender in analyzing the diasporic subjects, because according to her ,women have a unique position. This uniqueness because women are responsible for reproduction of cultural traditions:

With regard to gender, the role of men and women in the process of accommodation and syncretism may be different. Women are the transmitters and reproducers of ethnic and national ideologies and central in the transmission of cultural rules (Anthias and Yuval Davis 1989). At the same time they may have a different relation to the nation or ethnic group since they are not represented by it and are generally in a subordinate relation to hegemonic men who are also classed (Kandiyoti 1991, Walby 1994, Anthias 1992). Women may be empowered by retaining home traditions but they may also be quick to abandon them when they are no longer strategies of survival (Anthias 1992a, Bhachu 1988).⁴⁰

³⁹ Friedman, Susan Stanford. „The New Migration“: Clashes, Connections, and Diasporic Women's Writing.” .*Contemporary Women's Writing* 3.1 (2009): p23.

⁴⁰ Anthias, Floya. “Evaluating „Diaspora“: Beyond Ethnicity?.” *Sociology* 32.3 (1998):p 571.

The role of women in Diaspora might be less derived from their ability to retain traditions than to their power of deciding what to do with these traditions, which makes them "defining elements to a whole ethnic group"⁴¹. Anthias states that women have two different kinds of gender relations: one related to their ethnic group and the other related to the host country. As she states: "What is clear is that they experience two sets of gender relations or patriarchal relations, those of their own classed and gendered group and those of the main ethnic group represented in the state"⁴². Therefore, this paper will investigate the two types of gender relations experienced by the female characters. It also show how these Arab women characters had gender relations in their journeys between the two different cultures: one of them, Salwa Haddad who seems trapped in the new gender relations found in the host countries presented in the drama in her relationship with Jack, while Khadra, although experiencing different gender relations, cannot be free from the restrictions imposed on her by the Muslim community she belongs to.

Clifford admits that "diasporic experiences are always gendered. But there is a tendency for theoretical accounts of Diasporas and diasporic cultures to hide this fact, to talk of travel and displacement in unmarked ways, thus normalizing male experiences"⁴³. Saying that Diasporas are gendered means that dislocated women have different experiences within Diaspora. Clifford emphasizes the importance of gender for diaspora studies by arguing:

Women's experiences are particularly revealing. Do Diaspora experiences reinforce or loosen gender subordination? On the one hand, maintaining connections with homelands, with kinship networks, and with religious and cultural traditions may renew patriarchal structures. On the other,

⁴¹ Gaby Semaan, "Arab Americans: Stereotypes, Conflict, History, Cultural Identity and Post 9/11," *Intercultural Communication Studies XXIII*., no. 2 (2014).p.26

⁴² Anthias, Floya. "Evaluating „Diaspora“: Beyond Ethnicity?." *Sociology* 32.3 (1998), p 571.

⁴³ Clifford, James. "Diasporas." *Migration, Diasporas and Transnationalism*. Ed. Steven Vertovec and Robin Cohen. Northampton: Edward Elgar, 1999.p.226

new roles and demands, new political spaces, are opened by diaspora interactions . . . they [women] may find their new diaspora predicaments conducive to a positive renegotiation of gender relations.⁴⁴

Clifford says that displacement from traditions of homelands does not mean being away from patriarchy, it can be found in the gender relations in the host country.

The critic Susan Muaddi Darraj agrees that “despite recent interest in the Middle East, following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, the West has not made significant progress in its understanding of either Arab culture or of the role of women in the Arab society and within the Arab community in America”⁴⁵. The image of the Arab woman is always seen as an oppressed veiled woman, and Darraj states that “the Faceless Veiled Woman” is the Arab-American woman's version of the Angel in the House⁴⁶. According to her, women are stuck between two stereotypical images; the Victorian model of domestic women or the model of the Faceless Veiled Woman. She says:

Arab and Muslim women continue to be used as a means of justifying the “spreading of liberty” doctrine across the Middle East. At a time when East and West are allegedly at odds, Arabs in America – and especially Arab women – have become key players and, too frequently, pawns. In fact, the image of the oppressed, silenced Arab woman is frequently used by some as proof of the barbarity of Arab culture, and even to justify the West's foreign policy toward the East.⁴⁷

Though Arab-American women are facing two challenges: affirming themselves within their own community and family, and also speaking out this empowerment of the West, which is in this case the American society. Therefore, literature is a contributor that helps to deconstruct the stereotypes regarding Arab-American women. Darraj states that literature is “a reminder of the blatant hypocrisy of viewing Arab and Muslim women as victims of a backwards culture while

⁴⁴ Ibid p 227.

⁴⁵ Darraj . *Muader S.Food for Our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists*.1994.p159

⁴⁶ Ibid,p164.

⁴⁷ Ibid, p 159.

forgetting the way one's own culture often exploits women”⁴⁸. Arab American Literature though investigates and analyses of one's own belonging and cultural identity. Instead of insisting on barriers and differences between the two cultures (Arab and American), I emphasize on the main shared spaces, histories, and even shared bodies presented by Arab American women writers. The central question in their literature is how can we see, recognize, and understand each other, especially if we belong to different races, cultures? Can we find a common ground between the two spaces? How can previously colonized countries modernize and advance without detaching themselves from traditional cultural values?

Hyphenated Identities (Arab American Identity)

No one today is purely *one* thing. Labels like Indian or woman, or Muslim, or American are not more than starting points, which if followed into actual experience for a moment are quickly left behind. Imperialism consolidated the mixture of cultures and identities on a global scale. But its worst and most paradoxical gift was to allow people to believe that they were only, mainly, exclusively, white, or Black, or Western, or Oriental.

Edward Said⁴⁹

Hybridity is a concept in literary theory which is used by Michael Bakhtin to describe the double-voicedness as illustrated in novels. "What is hybridization?" he asks: "It is a mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance an encounter within the arena of an utterance, between two different linguistic consciousnesses, separated from one another by an

⁴⁸ Darraj, Susan Muaddi. "Personal and Political: The Dynamics of Arab American Feminism." *Gender, Nation and Belonging: Arab and Arab American Feminist Perspectives*. Spec. issue of *The MIT Electronic Journal of Middle East Studies* 5.2005.p166

⁴⁹ Edward Said "Culture and Imperialism». New York: Knopf, 1994.p336.

epoch, by social differentiation or by some other factor".⁵⁰ His definition of the linguistic hybridity can be also be extensive. I use the definition of the postcolonial critic Homi Bhabha. The hybrid world is a set of positions and identities, which is not clearly defined yet open to compromise, in order to engage with the other to try to create something together. Hybridity is the meeting between two identities which are in construction, not only on a political and social level, but also on a literary one. It involves approaching texts as hybrid works in which two cultures, which are in constant negotiation, coexist⁵¹. Within this current of cultural hybridity that the fiction of Arab- American women writers needs to be examined. Their literary work imposes varied conditions according to education, gender, origin, political ideology as well as family relations, religious background. Also they may present Muslims' response to both modernity and prejudices of the West especially after the events of 9/11, in which the Arab-American presence and voice have gained prominence. The invisibility of Arab-Muslim women within the American society has prevented engagement with US mainstream culture. Perhaps this situation has created the sense of need for Arab-Americans to show both their Arab background and their position in society as full American citizens. This absence has characterized many Arab-American and Muslim women in the West before and after 9/11, and urged the need to create a space by which Arab- American feminists can speak.

Many Arab- Americans and Arab/ Muslim feminist writers created their own space from which they have become their own representatives and transmitted their own personal experiences. They created this space in which they live on the borders of the Western and Muslim/ Middle Eastern culture. In this space, they now define and experience a hybrid identity.

⁵⁰ M.M Bakhtin " discourse in a novel" 1981, p358; see also 304.explained by Fred Evans «social Voices, Oracles, and the Politics of Multiculturalism"; Duquesne University, Pittsburgh: „Maria Lugones and other writers of post-colonial discourse

⁵¹ For the history of hybridity as a concept, see Young, 1995. See also Bhabha 1994a; Bhabha 1996; Hall and Du Gay 1996; and Lavie and Swedenburg 1996.

As Arab-Muslim woman who write in English, Leila Halaby and Mohja Kahf represent the Minor Literature of female immigrants. A hybrid of numerous East-West modern literary trends, the writings of Laila Halaby and Mohja Kahf reveal fascinating features in contemporary Arab and Muslim literature produced in English and deals with crucial motifs such as "migration/exile".

As defined by Gilles Deleuze and Femix Guattari:" immigrant writing is a minor literature"⁵². Such a literature has three characteristics: "the deterritorialization of language, the connection of the individual to a political immediacy, and the collective assemblage of enunciation"⁵³. The first, the expressions, rhetorical figures, ideological intentions and the worldview of the author's minority group is defamiliarizing and distinguishing the writers' language and style from the one of the dominant culture. The second, who is very relevant in the case study of this research paper, which is the marginal statue of those individuals in the minority literature forces them to connect to politics. This is connected clearly to the third characteristic which connects the personal to the collective because of the pressure those minorities live in⁵⁴.

Deleuze and Guattari's theory can be relevant in understanding the works of Arab immigrant women's literature as minorities. Their observation on the conjunction of the private and the collective, the personal and the political, more evident in the work of Mohja Kahf and Laila Halaby presented in this research paper. The traumatic events in those memoirs and the question of identity for those characters who suffered a collective tragedy are conceived in tensions between individual and community. Dislocation affects gender relations in diasporic

⁵² Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattar " *Kafka. Toward a Minor Literature* "1986.P18.

⁵³ Ibid,p18.

⁵⁴ Wail S Hassan, *Immigrant Narratives :Orientalism and Cultural Translation in Arab American and Arab British Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.p 4

communities. Besides, taking into account the issues of personal and national identities to understand the contemporary writings of Diaspora, we also have to bear in mind that "this movement of dislocation also interferes with gender relations"⁵⁵. The migration movement has made possible for women to question their status in the new social environment. These women's texts project a vision of identity characterized by flexibility and relationships. This vision can be understood through the strategy that the Arab American authors under discussion use to deal with this configuration of "inside-outside and self-other which does not claim to eliminate such boundaries as much as it aims to question their nature and their formation"⁵⁶.

As Edward Said puts it: "such works are feminist but not exclusivist... engaged but not demagogic, sensitive but not maudlin about women's experience"⁵⁷. The Moroccan feminist Fatima Mernissi, states in other terms equally that "We Muslim women can walk into the modern world with pride, knowing that the quest for dignity, democracy, and human rights, for full participation in the political and social affairs of our country, stems from no imported Western values, but is a true part of the Muslim tradition."⁵⁸

The works of almost all Arab and Muslim women writers in English reveal a clear sense of connection with their Islamic culture as Mohja Kahf and Laila Halaby put it. The discourse of these writers strive for an agenda that is quite distinct from Euro-American feminism as Merriam Cooke put it: "During the past twenty-five years, women from the Arab world have been writing themselves into visibility at both national and international levels. Historically invisible, they are becoming agents of possible transformations the societies in which their voices had traditionally

⁵⁵ Ibid, p 5.

⁵⁶ Somaya Sami Sabry, *Arab-American Women's Writing and Performance: Orientalism, Race and the Idea of the Arabian Nights* (I.B.Tauris, 2011).p.70.

⁵⁷ Said, Edward. "Culture and Imperialism". London. Routledge. (1994) .p.337

⁵⁸ Mernissi Fatima, «Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Inquiry» Oxford: Basil Blackwell.1991.p VIII.

not been heard "⁵⁹. The fact that women are considered agents in this transformation is largely due to Diaspora. As Brah argues, Diasporas are “potentially the sites of hopes and new beginnings are contested cultural and political terrains where individual and collective memories collide, reassemble and reconfigure” ⁶⁰. That in Mohja Kahf’s *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* and Laila Halaby’s *Once in Promised Land*, the main characters negotiate their subjectivity in Diaspora.

⁵⁹ Mirriam, Cooke, "Women Claim Islam Creating Islamic Feminism through Literature New York • London: Routledge, 2001. p 4

⁶⁰ Brah, Avtar. *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*. London: Routledge, 1996, p 193.

CHAPTER II

The Loss Within Here and There: The Study of Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land*.

Introduction

One noticeable characteristic of our time is the instability of identities. Arab people are generally aware of a single home, a single culture, but Arab communities in Diaspora are aware at least of two. Awareness of those dimensions will be explored in this chapter through the examination of the ways in which the political and the social dimensions of the tragic event 9/11, brought to discussion on the personal front. I argue that Salwa, the principal character of *Once in a Promised Land*, is strongly affected by the space in which she exists and that the ways in which place and time shape Salwa's sense of identity remain central for the understanding of the novel. Salwa chooses to invite others to listen, and decode her silence, and uncover the narrative of her displacement and of the self-shaped by her dislocation.

Laila Halaby is an interesting literary figure. Born in Beirut, Lebanon, to a Jordanian father and an American mother, she studied folklore for a year in Jordan, and then moved to Arizona. Not considering herself an Arab-American, since, according to her, she is Arab *and* American. Halaby said "I was always in this purgatory stage of "otherness", neither here nor there"⁶¹. This experience of living between two cultures allowed Halaby to transfer all her attention of this state onto her novel. By translating the sense of displacement, she has written two novels so far: *West of Jordan* (2003) and *Once in a Promised Land* (2007), which tells the story of a Salwa and Jassim, a young couple who left Jordan to live in Arizona, and their plight following the paranoia against Arabs in the U.S in the wake from 9/11. Halaby writes in the tradition of many Arab women like Ahdaf Soueif in *In the Eye of the Sun* (1992), fashioning her novel around the protagonist relationships and political event. The use of both foreshadowing and temporal shifts as narrative devices bears strong resemblances with Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977).

⁶¹ Joan ,Schuman. "Pick" . Tuscon Weekly. <http://www.tucsonweekly.com/tucson/pick/Content?oid=1072358>. May, 22 . 2003.

Both Halaby and Silko use traditional folktales with their own narratives. Halaby acknowledges in an interview "being annoyed by western stereotypes of Arab women as submissive; the Arab women she knows are emotionally resilient"⁶². Her portrayal of the life of Arabs in the USA creates a different kind of social history. The life of the couple is trapped in their origin and only when they acknowledge and accept their heritage and identity can they move towards self-fulfillment.

Through reading *Once in a Promised Land*, I aim to show the integration of the personal and the political dimensions as an important feature of Laila Halaby's work through which she explores the link between sexual politics and international politics⁶³ by embracing wider issues such as the plights and suffering of Arabs in America after 9/11. Moreover, this chapter underlines Halaby's ambivalent attitude to religion, portraying faith as largely disconnected from the characters' actions. From the start of the novel, Halaby positions Jassim and Salwa as non-practicing Muslims. Salwa feels that she is "missing something" in her life because her faith in God is hypocritical: she occasionally prays and asserts that "there is no god but God"⁶⁴, but, she consistently worships "the American Capitalist lifestyle" as a false deity, attempting to fill the void she feels through materialist means.

I am drawing on theories of Diaspora to guide my analyses of Halaby's novel. Statements made by James Clifford, and Stuart Hall, are the main directions that I will follow regarding Diaspora issues. Hall mentions some factors that contribute to the distinctions present in the way diasporic subjects deal with their ethnicity and traditions. According to him, "there is very considerable variation, both of commitment and of practice, between and within different

⁶² Carolyn, Beacon Press. <http://www.beacon.org/client/readguide/8359rg.cfm#interview.html>. February 2, 2007

⁶³ by sexual politics versus international politics I mean the writer's integration of personal dilemma of Salwa and her sexual life regarding the political event 9/11.

⁶⁴ Laila, Halaby. «Once in a Promised Land". Beacon Press.(2007).p 89. All subsequent references to this novel are to this edition.

communities – between different nationalities, within religious faiths, between men and women, and across the generations”⁶⁵. Moreover, I will present considerations related to gender, and that are similarly connected to diaspora. Theories by Susan Stanford Friedman, Nadeen Naber will be introduced so that readers can become acquainted with the approaches to gender that I have chosen to support my literary analyses.

The present chapter proceeds through the themes that I found central in the writer's cultural project. Characters are mere instruments of the author's preoccupations and as such themes will allow me to explore the novel deeply, and to draw a thorough analysis. Since one of the main aims of this dissertation is to show the diasporic experience, first I will focus on Salwa's constant sense of displacement, both within her country of origin (Jordan) and within the public/American one. I will analyze the reasons for the sense of loss experienced by the character, as well as the consequences of loss on her. She is someone who was born American and raised in Jordan and who never belongs there or to his Palestinian origin, but who does not feel at home in the United States either.

Secondly, I will explore Salwa's rebelliousness against restricted norms and I will investigate how these behaviors are related to her intention to be accepted in the United States, and whether she ends up being successful or not. I will specifically rely on Nathalie Handal's discussions about sexuality, and Nada Elia's analyses of stereotypes of Arab people in the United States. Susan Friedman's considerations about agency⁶⁶ will also shed light on Salwa's behaviors.

Salwa's negotiations between the Arab and the American world will be investigated in the third part. The character's attempts to deal with the two sides of her hybrid identity will be

⁶⁵ Stuart Hall “Conclusion: The Multicultural Question” in *Un/settled Multiculturalisms: Diasporas, Entanglements, “Transruptions”*. Ed. Bamor Hesse. London: Zed Books, (2000) -p220

⁶⁶ Friedman, Susan Stanford. “Bodies on the Move: A Poetics of Home and Diaspora.” *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*2004.p 428.

analyzed, as well as the strategies she uses in order to achieve a certain balance within the Diaspora. Here, I will mainly rely on Stuart Hall's considerations of hybridism, while Susan Darraj will support my deconstruction of stereotypes related to Arab men and women.

The relevance of this study is justified by the fact that, by investigating the heterogeneity of women character in *Once in a Promised Land*, this literary analysis intends to contribute to the deconstruction of some stereotypes related to Arab-American women. The fact that there are few works about the literary representation of Arab-American feminism, and mainly there are not many critical considerations of *Once in a Promised Land*, a fact that eventually ensures place to my contribution in a field not yet fully explored.

1. Salwa's Loss and Displacement

Storytelling and memory are used by Halaby to reflect the Arab experiences in the US. *Once in a Promised Land* opens with the return journey of the Haddads in the airport. Halaby prefaces *Once in a Promised Land* with the statement: "Salwa and Jassim are both Arabs. Both Muslims. But of course they have nothing to do with what happened to the World Trade Center. Nothing and everything"⁶⁷, and the novel gradually reveals that the truth lies somewhere between these extremes. Through the preface, the writer invites the reader to forget all stereotypical notions and thoughts and put them away during reading the novel:

«Before I tell you this story, I ask that you open the box and place in it any notions and preconceptions, any stereotypes with regard to Arabs and Muslims that you can find in your shirtsleeves and pockets, tucked in your briefcase, forgotten in your cosmetic bag, tidied away behind your ears, rolled up in your underwear, saved on your computer's hard drive. This box awaits terrorists, veils, oil, and camels. There's room for all of your billionaires, bombers, and belly-dancers".

⁶⁷ Altaf Bhat Mudasir, "Broken Promises in a 'Promised Land': Race and Citizenship after 9/11 in Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land*. »*Asian Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies* .Volume 2, Issue 7, July 2014.p VIII

Halaby proceeds to stimulate the reader's attention: "And finally, throw in those thoughts about submissive women . . . and hands cut off . . . and multiple wives . . . and militant bearded men . . . There. That will do for now. Enjoy your trip. I don't need to lock the box, for it has a power of its own and will stay closed for the duration of our story. Do you feel lighter now, relieved of your excess baggage? Trust me; it will make listening to the story easier, and you won't get dog shit all over my floors." (IX). This fictional moment of addressing the reader's mind and thoughts directly by stating a neutral position right from the beginning is one of several that marks Halaby's text and allow her to offer commentary on her own fiction.

Halaby presents individuals who see beyond a simple minded clash between the Modern World and the Old Ways as they struggle to make lives for themselves. While representing young people wrestling with questions of identity, they escape the preoccupations of adolescent narcissism to explore much wider connections⁶⁸. As it is the case for our case of study "Salwa" the protagonist of *Once in a Promised Land*". Salwa was born in America, raised in Jordan, and has never been in Palestine, her original homeland, not expressing any interest in it," She had erased Palestine from her very name." (36). However, the fact that she does not show much interest in her Arab origins does not mean that she is strongly attached to the United States either, since she does not feel comfortable in America " she had tasted America and rejected it " (15). She finds herself in a Third Space where she struggles to find a place of her own in the Diaspora. Her dislocation is what Homi Bhabha qualifies as "the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity"⁶⁹. Therefore, I will analyze how Salwa behaves in-betweeness of two cultures with which she does not feel any solid identification.

⁶⁸ Williams David . "This Hyphen Called My Spinal Cord: Arab-American Literature at the Beginning of the 21st Century". World Literature Today, Vol. 81, No. 1 2007 p 59

⁶⁹ Homi bhabha. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994 p 145

First, I would make a contrast between the beautiful mythic origin of Salwa's name and the very different and practical reality. The most noticeable and significant symbol of one's cultural identity, is his/her name. Salwa is a direct Quranic name for girls that means "consolation", "that which brings happiness", "something that makes you forget your sadness and worries"⁷⁰ As if the writer asks us to wonder if Salwa found her consolation in America; is it America that she dreamed of poured away her sadness or worries. Salwa's name is the tie to her Arab and Ethnic group that she belongs to, people will immediately connect her to this group "Arabs" which will raise reactions that associate her with an unwelcome ethnicity in American society especially, in the wake from 9/11.

Salwa Haddad an Arab American young woman struggling to fit into the in-between space she lives in. She behaves in an egoistic way to prove that she is American and not Arab "as the only child in her family who happened to be born in America, Salwa had already been the subject of teasing....Made in USA. Miss America And then, to formally cement her difference from the rest of the family" (47). She always feels that she belongs to the land of her birth, the land of dreams where she can wear her silky pajamas that "symbolized for her leisure. Women who wore those pajamas did not have the wide fingers and thickened wrists that raising children and cooking and cleaning everyday produced." (47). It was the same look for both of the Haddads, America was their destiny. Jassim on the other hand "had no desire to return to Jordan. What would he do there? He couldn't imagine living in that bureaucracy again, had become comfortable in this easy, predictable life" (71). We can say that returning home seem to both Haddads as a belonging to a past, the past that they will never look at or replace it with Americanness.

Salwa admits that this American life "was the life she had chosen, but it was not the life

⁷⁰ The dictionary of names and their meaning in the Quran. <http://quranicnames.com/salwa/>

she wanted, she is nevertheless unable to resist the illusory appeal of the American dream "(91). By this, she becomes the folkloric figure Nus Nsays ⁷¹(which in Arabic means half of a halving) that her grandmother used to tell her stories about. In one such story, Nus Nsays, using his smartness succeeds in escaping with his friend from the evil Ghula that kept him as hostage for years. Salwa was left to face her own Ghula (America)⁷². Even though Halaby's pronouncement in respect to America as a Ghula can often sound didactic and overly generalized, however, she also hints that "healing can only come after a return home from the seductions and false allure of the promised land"⁷³.

Salwa and Jassim belong to the second generation of immigrants in the US. Her parents tried their luck to chase wealth and happiness following the American dream. But these parents' experience is a way too different from Salwa and Jassim, given the 9/11 attacks. What does it mean to be an Arab American in America after the 9/11 attacks? How can an Arab (by origin) American (by birth) women to be American? What are the challenges that Salwa face in the US an Arab Women? These questions are crucial to the understanding of Salwa's loss between the country of origin and the host country.

Regarding the situation of Arabs in the United States, Nada Elia mentions that "the Othering" and rejection of Arabs and Arab Americans is as old as this country as is the erroneous homogenization of all Arab Americans as Muslims

"Emphasizing that, although the paranoia against Arabs in the U.S. has increased after 2001, they had already been present a long time before it..... As it predates 9/11, this rejection cannot be attributed to the trauma of the terrorist attacks, and is quite clearly based in religious intolerance, the assumption that Arabs are

⁷¹ Halaby interested in Arab folktales are part from her experience as a Fulbright scholar studying "folklore and its role in people's lives" 2011

⁷² Ataf Mudasar. "Broken Promises in a „*Promised Land*": Race and Citizenship after 9/11 in Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land*/ Asian Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies, 2(7) July, 2014. P 106

⁷³ Ibid, p 106

irrevocably "other" because they are Muslim, aliens in this Judeo-Christian culture”⁷⁴.

In fact, Halaby shows -by portraying the attacks of 9/11- the failure of most Arabs to understand America. They tend to create a false "American identity". For instance, Salwa has to “apply her Made in America face” when she visits the doctor about her pregnancy (60). Similarly, Jassim insists on wearing Speedos whereas in “America, where men did not wear Speedos unless they were serious swimmers” (110). This complicates the identity issues. Majaj, who suggests that "Arab-American identity is not an end goal to be celebrated but a starting point from which to redefine and resituate concepts of identity, relationship and community”⁷⁵.

Through Salwa's experience, it is possible to see that being a hyphenated subject seems to be a burden for her sometimes. In one of the arguments of her sister about Hassan, Siham thought he was good for Salwa, grounded her.

“He reminds you who you are,” she told Salwa more than once». Salwa didn’t answer as her brain filled with embarrassed thoughts. She liked Hassan—this much she knew. Beneath liking and the tiniest part of desire in which liking was wrapped, however, was her greed for a certain kind of life, and when she floated out those fantasies, Hassan was not a part of them (240).

Here, it is possible to notice Salwa's rejection to identify herself as being Jordanian that she is American and deserves a life of a Hollywood Queen in silky pajamas. Salwa is confronting the presence of her homeland and traditions by rejecting the traditional life style while she tries to embrace her to the host country. She expresses how much she enjoys her American identity "It certainly is easier here than at home. You live your life without being burdened by basic needs, so you can focus on larger things" (283). America was for her the land of wishes, "America pulled and yanked on her from a very young age, forever trying to reel her in. Only the America that pulled at her was not the America of her birth, it was the exported America of Disneyland

⁷⁴ Elia, Nada. “Islamophobia and the „Privileging“ of Arab American Women.” *NWSA Journal* 18.3 .2003 .p.156.

⁷⁵ Majaj, Lisa Suhair. “Arab-American Ethnicity: Locations, Coalitions, and Cultural Negotiations.” *Arabs in America: Building a New Future*. Ed. Michael W. Suleiman. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1999.p .326

and hamburgers, Hollywood and the Marlboro man, and therefore impossible to find. Once in America, Salwa still searched and tripped and bought smaller and sexier pajamas in the hope that she would one day wake up in that Promised Land" (49)." She always wondered that "If lived correctly, this American life was deceptively full: a giant house filled with desired items, cars too large to fit in their owners' garages, fine designer clothes to decorate the manicured body and all to cover the shell" (101).

Moreover, Americans are incapable of understanding Salwa as she is the one who needs to adapt in order to fit their culture "At first she had thought it was a result of her origins; coming from a different culture, "but now (after 9/11), all these years later, she was beginning to think it was simply the culture of America to show everything but to remain an island, a closed-up individual" (54). Therefore, we can see that her colleague Joan tries to help her by giving her American flags to put them in her car "Honey, I wanted to give you these." She held out her hands; each contained an American flag decal. "You should put one on your car, on the back window. You never know what people are thinking, and having this will let them know where you stand" (55) . Salwa is concerned about being accepted in the office, *which* may explain why she is afraid that the cultural shock experienced could scare her and people around her.

"Salwa folded herself up in the heavily air-conditioned office, which at 74 degrees denied the 93-degree reality of the desert in mid-October. Thoughts bustled through her brain, scrutinizing the life she was living. Denying reality. That's what I've been doing. Killing time, not living. Legs crossed, arms wrapped around herself, she sat, rattled, staring at decals given to her in kindness and in themselves loaded with hatred" (55).

Therefore, Salwa's displacement goes beyond her being positioned between two virtually distinct cultures, since even inside her own home she cannot feel stable and secure. Despite the multiple manifestations of her displacement, however, they are all basically generated by her situation as a diasporic subject who feels lost, confused. Even some aspects which, at first, may not seem to

be related to diaspora issues can be connected to them. For instance, the loss of self-confidence and dreams.

In conclusion, Salwa's feelings of displacement are mostly derived from her diasporic condition, and this shows how Diaspora issues can influence one's identity and how immigrants are influenced by their condition, and the cultural environment they inhabit. If these people do not have enough support or any solid ground to which they can resort, as it is the case of Salwa, this would open possibilities for them to be confused and disoriented. In consequence, they seem to be moving towards assimilation, in an effort to stop living in a divided world, but, in fact, they are lost between two worlds, trying to find a more comfortable position.

2. Salwa's Sexual Frustration:

The use of English language to write this novel may help us to locate Salwa's hybrid identity in different ways. In *Once in a Promised Land*, the most important ways are the related areas to romance and sex. When Salwa and Jassim Haddad, first meet, they are drawn to each other by their common love of America. The USA is the source of Salwa's romantic aspirations. We cannot say that Salwa loved Jassim because it was clear that she was falling in love with "America" beside his name "when she was a junior at the University of Jordan, Salwa's eyes scanned the bulletin boards, landed on a tiny flier: Water is the key to our survival. A lesson in self-sufficiency. Please join us this afternoon at 3 p.m. for a lecture by Dr. Jassim Haddad, hydrologist from America." (238). through a flashback narrated mostly from Salwa's perspective, the reader discovers that Salwa accepts Jassim's proposal because she likes the idea of Jassim's job in America and signs of his wealth. As a banking and economics student with tastes that "are far too expensive for the likes of Hassan" (241), her Palestinian boyfriend, she meets Jassim at the lecture she opts to attend because the flier for the lecture indicates that Dr.

Jassim Haddad is “from America” (238-39). His lecture, which characterizes the conflict between Israel and Jordan as a conflict over the control of water, leaves Salwa “transfixed” (249). Although Hassan views Jassim as “thin” and “average-looking,” he wears an expensive-looking suit,” understands power, and hails from the nation Salwa loves best "(249). When he proposes within a matter of days of their meeting, Salwa readily accepts, sacrificing her relationship, her home, for the promise of wealth and a life in America.

Each of the couple sees the other as enabling a move to America. Through a flashback narrated from Jassim’s perspective, Halaby’s reader learns that the possibility exists that he merely proposes because he desires American citizenship: as the narrator observes, after Jassim proposal, “in the very back of his mind, in only the faintest lettering, was the idea that Salwa’s American citizenship would enable them both to stay. Forever, if he chose” (70). Salwa answered his proposal by saying " I would like that very much. I would like to go to America too.” (Yes, she had said that; he remembered her words clearly. At the time he had been shocked, not expecting her to agree so quickly without asking more questions.)" (68-69).

There is much to write about the relationship of Salwa and Jassim. It was not a typical relationship between husband and wife. It was a marriage of interest. Interest in "America" the Land that gave them "nothing "and "everything". Jassim on the one hand was astonished by the fact that Salwa is already an American citizen," Jassim raised his eyebrows and looked from Salwa to her father" (70). This fact may change his life forever, marrying an American citizen will pave the way for him to live an easy life in his beloved America. He never cared for her or even loved her. He tasted love in America before his marriage; it "was Cornelia, a South African who awoke in Jassim something new. (Even now the thought of Cornelia poked at him a bit through the water.) If he had believed in romantic love, she would have been his first. Instead, he

viewed their relationship as a perfect connection. Cornelia was bright, open, ambitious, independent, and sexually confident, easily welcoming him to entwine his life and body with hers" (63). After that Cornelia left to her home country to live him with his American dreams "'I have to go home, Jassim. You have to go home. We are both of us too wedded to our countries to change.'" (63).

Salwa on the other hand, knew Hassan before her marriage to Jassim. The story of Salwa and Hassan was this: they had known each other since they were young children, since Hassan's family moved into her neighborhood after his father died. Though he and Salwa were never particular friends, they acknowledged each other with a certain connection, a tie between the children of parents who have lost everything and are moving beyond that to become active members of their host society. During their first year of university, they shared an English class, which Salwa excelled in and Hassan barely passed. Hassan's mother mentioned his difficulty to Siham, Salwa's oldest sister (best friends with Hassan's oldest sister), who promptly volunteered Salwa to help Hassan. And they had been friends since.

"Salwa was appreciative of Hassan's handsome face, sense of humor, and political activism, saw him as a symbol of Palestine, and Hassan was smitten with Salwa, who in his eyes was the definition of perfection. Had been since he had first laid eyes on her at the age of six. Their friendship tipped in Salwa's favor as she pushed one after another of Hassan's cousins and friends, most who still lived in Wihdat refugee camp, off the scale, filled it instead with her own, more established Palestinian and Jordanian friends. By their third year of university (the year in which Salwa felt the need to attend a lecture on water), Hassan had severed bonds with most of his disenfranchised pals in order to be with Salwa, to sit with her in the cafeteria, to go on picnics with her and her friends"(240).

Salwa liked Hassan—this much she knew. Beneath liking and the tiniest part of desire in which liking was wrapped, however, was her greed for a certain kind of life, and when she floated out those fantasies, Hassan was not a part of them .She always kept asking herself what if she married Hassan. She would never fulfill her dream to be in America. Jassim gave her this

opportunity but Hassan can only give her the life that her mother always spoke about a typical one where: "Women are made to have children" (100). But Salwa wanted more, she wanted an American life style where love and romance, success, money, silky pajamas, and Victoria secrets lingerie made in USA exist and no place for children.

Salwa's marriage began to collapse after nine years of exile in the USA. It has barely anything to do with the incident of 9/11; but rather with the relationship of husband-wife that she had all those years. It started with the lie she provoked when she missed her pill, that she recognized that her life was just an illusion. "The first day Salwa pretended to herself that she forgot. On the second day she couldn't forget, or pretend to forge "(9).Salwa intentionally missed the pills because she felt that her life misses something "For the past several months it had seemed to Salwa as though she had no other meaning in her life. It was all so difficult to sort out. Her used-up dreams left her empty, wanting for something. Home, perhaps. Familiarity and warmth. Something pure, like the whites of milk. Children."(100). This void in Salwa's life was reasonable. She has a complex relationship with her husband that seemed cold and lacking a magical touch. Salwa's Lie covered a glorious underbelly. It was not I didn't take my birth control pill but instead a much more colorful for a few years now I've felt that I've been missing something in my life. That's why I got a real estate license. It wasn't enough, though. I think having a child will fill that void."(10). Jassim was against having babies for several reasons, and Salwa as well postponed the pregnancy in order to have her dream life in America which was impossible with babies and responsibility all around. Salwa was looking for a clue to have a happy marriage and she found it in her mother's voice:" A relationship is strengthened by having children, and a couple who does not have children is unnatural"(100)

" Lies of that nature rearranged entire lives, plunked people down where they didn't

belong and left others out in the cold with no coat on"(9). Salwa's lie had many consequences. She felt a terrible guilt of missing those pills for 5 days. Salwa's behavior and feeling of frustration is a noticeable remark in the novel. Women usually feel happy or eager to have that sense of being pregnant and having babies, but this was not the case for Salwa. "So what was left? This life was the one she had custom-ordered according to her specifications, each bullet point checked off. It was all there, exactly. Almost exactly. Having a baby was a recent addition; it had not been on her original checklist "(99) .She was afraid, afraid of Jassim's reaction, and afraid of the fact of having a baby in this country. It is possible to say that it was all in Salwa's mind and behaviors. "She might have a baby in her belly. A lovely perfect baby who would grow to be a wonderful perfect child. She so wanted to share this with Jassim, and she would. She just needed to create a good atmosphere so that he would be more receptive. For just a brief moment, a surge of anger rose up within her—why should she have to create a nice atmosphere to tell him this most natural thing?"(11).The baby as a symbol of love and passion and the tie that can deepen the relationship between her and Jassim in her situation provoked fear, fear of losing the American life she has now can be easily destroyed.

Indeed, the issue of unexpected pregnancy is the one which sharply widens the gap between Jassim and Salwa." Jassim could not fathom having a helpless baby in the house. "Humans were so odd, to give birth to creatures that were totally powerless and dependent for so many years. Evolutionarily speaking, it was amazing anyone survived. At this point, there was no way their lives could accommodate a child, since they had no family around to help"(110). Salwa's reaction reflects her desire not to have a child now since things are not going well with Jassim. She had no desire to have a child (for nine years of marriage and exile) has been challenged by the patriarchal culture surrounding her which glorifies the life and role of the

married woman only as a mother, the life like her Jordanian friend Randa leads. Whenever Salwa is under duress, she turns to Randa, who, when Salwa is miscarrying, kneads out “what Salwa had been avoiding for close to three years now: that she was not happy in her life” (91). Randa other than Salwa is a devoted Muslim women , her ability to lead a traditional life despite late-capitalist American temptations⁷⁶, enables her to retain “centuries of wisdom, knots of history and meaning” in her fingers and a sense of her homeland in her house (91), where over a warm stove, she makes Arabic coffee for Salwa, stirring in cardamom pods and seeds to create the taste of home, as though she had “reached across the continental United States, stretched her arm across the Atlantic, and put the pot back on the burner” (283-84). She sees the value of retaining a complete connection with her religious and cultural heritage, and when Salwa confesses her infidelity with Jake to her, she advises Salwa to return home to Jordan to regain a "sense of her Jordanian, Islamic identity"⁷⁷. Muslim identity, in Randa's eyes, necessarily involves commitment and restriction of religion which is for Salwa a bind that keeps her from the American dream.

Salwa had troubles with her pregnancy and finally miscarries after more than week of bed rest. She tells Jassim the truth after her miscarriage out of the guilt she felt. And surprisingly "Jassim leaned forward and embraced his wife, held her deeply, for he had no words to offer her and he recognized that the crisis was over. Her lie, her pregnancy, her miscarriage, had all worked themselves out without his having to say anything, decide anything, so it was not so hard to give himself to her" (104).The dazzling thing about the couple's behavior toward having a baby, is that both of them were deeply wishing to have it, they both had dreams of having a baby girl called " Amal" which means "hope". Significantly , the writers chooses this name because

⁷⁶ Hampton.J. Barbara .”Free to be Muslim-Americans:Community, Gender, and Identity in Once in a Promised Land, The Taqwacores, and The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf.p256.

⁷⁷ Katharina Motyl "No Longer a Promised Land – The Arab and Muslim Experience in the U.S. after 9/11". P 230

both Jassim and Salwa were looking for a HOPE; a hope to have their dreams fulfilled in this land, which no longer is the promised land. Salwa thought " It is different now, she thought. If I am pregnant, I cannot raise my child here, away from everything I know. If I am pregnant." .Out of nowhere, a thought louder than any of the voices popped into her head, a thought she had not had before: We cannot live here anymore (54).

Salwa's frustration can be read as a deeper and wider sense of frustration. It is a frustration that has to do with one's sense of wholeness and here Jassim's ignorance is an effect as well as cause. It is the individual in the modern Arab world facing the reality, and feeling his or her helplessness which makes Jassim ignorant of his surrounding willing only to live the dream of wealth in America rather than paying attention of his own life which is a cause for Salwa to look for "love". Love and freedom that she could not find with Jassim neither with Hassan Shaheed. But rather with a younger American boy "Jack". She had not thought to fine-tune her wishes, had just assumed that fulfilling would come along automatically with American freedom. Tucked in the word freedom, somewhere near the double, was the code that for a husband to offer his wife the freedom to do as she pleased, his attention would have to be drawn elsewhere. There in lay the problem that in Jassim's enthusiasm for his work and in his offer of the life she wanted, he had somehow neglected her" (99).

Salwa believes in freedom: she considers herself as a free woman only with the fact that she is American and born in America, she thinks she is free from the restrictions imposed by society like it used to be in Arab society back home. However, when one analyzes Salwa's attitudes and behaviors, it is possible to notice that, despite her supposed craving for freedom, this character is, in fact, trapped in the desire to be accepted by the American people. By beginning a relationship with another man while married to Jassim, Salwa is furthering the divide between her and

Jassim, and shutting the door of opportunity for reconciliation in her marriage after the miscarriage. But at the end, neither Jassim nor Jack treats her as Salwa, the human being. Jassim was too far away, and their relationship was so fragile to face the problems occurred in their life " It was not just her Lie that had brought distance between her and her husband and surrounded them with tension, it was the patriotic breathing of those around them. American flags waving, pale hands willing them to go home" (184-185). It was always America that settled them together the same that shattered them apart. Salwa was unhappy and frustrated even though Jack is the first man to satisfy her bodily: "Salwa's conscience fought within her, shouted the impossibility of what she was doing, allowing an American boy to envelop her married self. While her body was embraced and adored, her brain and soul fought hard to get away, shouted for him to let go of her. Instead he kissed her again, this time not so gently, not so innocently. This time it was full of wanting and passion, a long kiss Salwa had not tasted before, a minty, indiscreet kiss that silenced the shouting and exiled her from her life." (175). Salwa had stepped out of her real life, knew in the depths of herself that this was disaster in the making, and yet couldn't help but enjoy the anticipation. Much like the Japanese women in the picture she saw in Jake's apartment "This is from a Japanese myth about a young woman who searches for happiness, and each time she thinks she has found it, it escapes her. Happiness takes different forms, which are represented by different animals in different pictures."(209) Of course, the point of the myth is that happiness is not something that is found, it is something that one has. Within." *Within*. "Written in Italics to draw the attention of the reader that Salwa's resolution is nowhere but deep in herself.

Salwa's affair with the insecurely possessive American young boy characterized by a dynamic of ambivalent attraction/disgust, this antagonistic connection between Salwa and Jake is an unconscious attempt on her part to prove her Americanness

through adopting perceived "American" codes of behavior. Her attraction to Jake is an attempt to cling to (white) American norms⁷⁸.

Salwa ends up frustrated and scared about what she has done and she is afraid of the future, because she knows that what she did will not have pleasant consequences, she knows these consequences will be directed to her and she will be blamed for whatever happened. Thus, Salwa knows that the situation will not get any better for her, it will shock everyone and will probably make people position themselves against her, and since women are supposed to respect some restrictions and limits and not to react against them. According to the norms of the Arab culture and religious restrictions that expect women to strictly obey and follow its principles. Salwa is scared because of the unfair she committed and it is to her Arab friend Randa and to which she runs after going through these terrible moments. It is there, in the arms of Randa. She runs away from the pain that American culture causes in her. At this moment, her Arab roots work as a shelter for her. While Randa does not approve of the affair, she stands by her friend and, as ever, gives her emotional and moral support. Life is more messy and complex than the plots and characters of the American movies with which Salwa identifies herself. Thus Salwa needs to develop a sharper perspective over her reality by returning home.

The second time Salwa meets Jake she decides to break up with him which is something he could not tolerate. After Jake sees her home trip a return to the "pigsty" she came from, Jake's insistence on reminding Salwa of her Arabness while hitting her with the Japanese painting she loved before on her head, Jake shouted out at her: "Bitch! Goddamn fucking Arab bitch" (322). Indicate that Jake attempts to "define the boundaries of whiteness"⁷⁹. This is a massively circulated image of the powerless, subdued Muslim female. Jake perceives the fact that he cannot

⁷⁸ Anushiravani Alireza1 and Khademi, Abolfazl "Representation of Islam in Post 9/11 English Novels" *Research Journal of Language, Literature and Humanities* .Vol. 2(8), 1-13, August (2015). P12

⁷⁹ Carol Fadda-Conre "Arab American citizenship in crisis: destabilizing representations of Arabs and Muslims in the us after 9/11".*Modern Fiction Studies*. [Syracuse University](#) .2011.p546

even control a “powerless Muslim woman” as a crisis in his masculinity and self-conception. He seeks to restore his superiority by exercising the one realm in which he is superior to Salwa, i.e. physical strength. Hence, as Altaf puts it "Jake’s masculinity is restored by physically punishing Salwa for her agency"⁸⁰. On a second level, Jake’s humiliation coincides with the sense of crisis and humiliation that September 11 instilled in the American self-image. Salwa’s violent punishment for violating Jake’s sense of masculinity, then, can be read as a symbolic punishment of Arab Muslims for destroying the Twin Towers (which were, after all, phallic symbols signifying American might) and thus shattering the American self-image of being almighty, invulnerable and in control.⁸¹

Regarding the ways in which gender and sexuality have been constructed in the novel, Halaby sheds the light on the idea of Arab men have full freedom to have affairs and total freedom with other women (like it was the case with Jassim knowing Penny and confronts to her his problem with the FBI agents and the case of the accident when he inadvertently killed the boy and not with his Wife Salwa). On the other hand, Salwa was afraid of knowing Jake, her co-worker. She gets terrified by the American freedom with its different customs. However, if identification with the more traditional traits of the Arab culture seems appropriate to fill this gap that the American culture leaves in her, Salwa cannot feel a sense of belonging to Arab origins either. Therefore, Salwa is "caught in-between two cultures to which she does not belong and with which she does not identify, leaving her with a strong sense of loss and displacement"⁸². At this point it is worth noting that Salwa differs from other diasporic experiences in her role as cultural mediator.

⁸⁰ Mudasir Altaf Bhat ." Broken Promises in a ‘*Promised Land*’: Race and Citizenship after 9/11 in Laila Halaby’s *Once in a Promised Land*". Asian Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies .Volume 2, Issue 7, July 2014.p 109

⁸¹ *Ibid*,p 109.

⁸² Mudasir Altaf Bhat ." Broken Promises in a ‘*Promised Land*’: Race and Citizenship after 9/11 in Laila Halaby’s *Once in a Promised Land*". Asian Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies .Volume 2, Issue 7, July 2014.p 112.

Conclusion

Salwa could not find any balance between her dual identities. In such conflicts that characterize the process of hybridism, Stuart Hall states: "It is about a process of cultural translation, agonistic, since it is never completed, but which remains in its indecisiveness"⁸³. Salwa could be another example of hybridized subjects given by Hall, since she manages to live with distinct aspects of the Arab and American culture. Salwa is displaced in her own nuclear family, because she does not have anyone to protect her and to care for her. Her careless Husband only contributes in increasing her sense of none belonging anywhere, and, therefore, she is constantly haunted by fear. In fact, Fear governs Salwa's life a fear of the future, of the unknown, as a misfit in both cultures, this fear shapes her fragmented and displaced identity.

Bloodied and disfigured after her lover Jake attacks her (under drug effects) after she breaks up with him, Salwa is left at the end of the novel unconscious at the hospital, with Jassim sitting next to her. Although her actual return to Jordan is not clear pointing to her shame and her failure in the Promised Land. It is in this way then that at the novel's end, Salwa, "Palestinian by blood, Jordanian by residence, and American by citizenship" (70), retains no sense of true belonging to any country. The "promised land" may be the place of new beginnings, may be the point of return is her origins, Jordan, which makes her Jordanian in the first place. For Laila Halaby, the "promised land" may be nowhere or everywhere, may be the point of departure or the point of arrival. However, one thing is certain: to cross hyphens in unique and strategic way.

⁸³ Hall, Stuart. "Thinking the Diaspora: Home-Thoughts From Abroad." *Small Axe* 6 (1999). p 47.

CHAPTER V

Exilic Memoir: Arab Muslim Women in Search of Identity: The Study of Mohja Kahf's "*The Girl in The Tangerine Scarf*".

Introduction:

Mohja Kahf is an Arab-Muslim literary and contemporary fiction writer. I highlight these factors about her writing that becomes relevant when analyzing Kahf's fiction. Her female heroine presents much of the ideas which she mentioned in her novel's epilogues⁸⁴. To date, Mohja Kahf has produced her insightful book *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman: From Termagant to Odalisque* (1999), and the columnist, "Sex and the Umma" on Muslim Wake Up! Website. In *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman*, Kahf traces the change that the image of Muslim women in the literature of the West drawing her examples from medieval chansons and romances, Renaissance drama, Enlightenment prose, and Romantic poetry. She further links the changing images of Muslim women to European relations with the Islamic world, as well as to shifts in gender dynamics within Western societies⁸⁵.

As a hybrid herself, born in Syria and migrated to the US in 70s, the writing of Mohja Kahf depict fascinating features in contemporary Arab and Muslim literature produced in English. It deals with crucial topic such as the representation of migration and exile, Islamic fundamentalism, gender relations and stereotypical prejudices and racial Islamophobia of the hegemonic west. In Kahf's novel, however, Islam is the main theme, and everything goes around is an attempt to liberate Islam from inside to the outside⁸⁶.

Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* is a semi-autobiographical *Bildungsroman*. As the title of the novel describes the protagonist who has an Islamic background and wears a scarf. The tangerine scarf mentioned in the title refers to a scarf given to Khadra by her father's

⁸⁴ The interview with the writer in the Appendix.

⁸⁵ Layla Al Maleh "Arab Voices in Diaspora Critical Perspectives on Anglophone Arab Literature" Amsterdam - New York, 2009,p29.

⁸⁶ Fouad,Mami. »Liberating Islam from within :A Reading to Mohja Kahf's The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf ».Cultures and Languages in Contact. 2016.

aunt, Teta. It can be read as a symbol for her heritage and her Islamic identity. I will show in this chapter the process of emotional and intellectual growth of the heroine: Khadra Shamy by crossing the ethnic and religious boundaries. I will also focus on how the writer symbolizes "the scarf or the veil "as the main element of Muslim women's identity.

Through the analysis of Mohja Kahf's novel, I look forward to question the Arab-Muslim womanhood in the USA as Diasporic subjects relying on Anita Manur, Brah Avtar and Stuart Hall's views on Diaspora. I will examine the heroin self-dependent identity symbolized by " the veil" and issues of gender relations among Muslim communities presented in the novel. Similarly, I will shed the light on Khadra Shamy's sense of identity in the host country as a discriminated Arab Muslim women and her pursuit of balance between the two cultures she lives in. I will rely on Majaj's explanation of the source of imbalance, and how it will affect diasporic subjects like Khadra el Shamy. I mostly focus on my own reading of the novel and the veil in relation to the Muslim woman's gender identity.

I will conclude that Khadra attempts to resolve the two conflicting worlds she belongs to, and how in the end she comes to find her own peace and identity, although that inner peace she found was at the expense of the hijab. Khadra's decision to give up on the hijab and to treat it merely as a symbol of Arab culture is an indication of the difficulty facing Muslim Arab-American women in preserving their Islamic identity within the U.S society especially during the post 9/11 period.

I- Khadra's Dilemma "the journey of the veil":

As an immigrant and a diasporic subject, Arab Muslim communities are facing a cultural dilemma. When they move into a new culture, they feel the cultural difference between them and

the host culture. Some might easily identify with the new cultural values and even choose to adopt them. If they choose to do so, they will have to form their identity in between what is already known and the new culture. They will struggle to have a balance between their original cultural heritage and the dominant culture. The result is that their identities become hybrid which is, according to Bhabha, is “bound to translating and transvaluing cultural differences.”⁸⁷

Khadra El Shamy, an American young woman born to Syrian immigrants. The novel begins with an adult Khadra narrating (in a chronicle and delicate way) her journey when she was returning to the city in which she was raised in "Indianapolis", "Simmonsville". Her family's life in there revolves around the "Dawah Center" for the Muslim community which claim to teach people the "Real Islam". Khadra narrates flash-backs of her childhood memories. The story then continues in a linear tone narrating Khadra's life as she grows from a child in Indiana into a successful journalist in Philadelphia taking the reader through her happy and unhappy moments of her life.

Khadra's hybridity is a mixture of three main axes: Arab, Muslim and American that are in conflict with one another without finding a balance between them which Khadra tries to resolve within her. In Kahf's narrative, it is clear that hybrid identities especially the Arab- American identity, is never stable. It is always a process of becoming. In Khadra's long journey to search for an identity, she shows various images of empowerment and oppression of the Muslim woman in America, and how they helped her to make the appropriate choice of the identity she wishes. She decides to take her battles and define her own identity. Kahf attempts to show veiled women, like herself and Khadra, enjoying a different kind of empowerment. This is part of her project to

⁸⁷ Bhabha. Homi. " *The Location of Culture* ": London: Routledge, 1994.p 30

represent an alternative meaning to the western stereotyping of Muslim women. She provides the reader with an opportunity to explore how the veil is an extended metaphor that can only be understood by analyzing the lived experiences of the Arab Muslim woman in the West. The narrative also supports the argument that veiled women are not muted persons nor are their identities a product of patriarchal norms. They tell their stories to open doors to see their differences and resist a wrong image influenced harmfully by prejudices.

Khadra narrates the thoughts that develop within her between herself as part of the Muslim community and the prejudices and racism of the Indiana people the "Liars"(1)⁸⁸. She also describes the narrow understanding of the people of the Dawah center to Islam and its interpretations. These conflicts evoke questions about Khadra's identity. And in order to find an answer, she decides to take that journey from Indiana to Mecca to Syria and back to Indiana. It is a journey from innocence and youth that is symbolized in her name to experience and adulthood. Khadra's journey with the veil ends in Syria where she decides to take off her veil and practice Islam the way she judges it suitable for her. She tries to come to terms with herself and her views of religion². She is no longer influenced by others' beliefs and opinion of her, and decides to find her connection with God and religion on her own. She is no longer lost between the two worlds that are in conflict with each other, the strict Muslim world and the moderate American world. The narrator describes her new experience:

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

⁸⁸ Kahf Mohja *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*. New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2006; all the subsequent references are from this edition.

It is within this rhythm that Kahf and Khadra share the thought that the Hijab is a choice, it is up to her to decide when and where to put it on or to take it off.

The images of veiled Muslim women play a distinctive role in many narratives in the West. Although what is represented as oppressive is the Muslim veil in general, it is the representations of the veil themselves that demand and enforce the exclusion of Muslim women.. In this regard, « the western representations put Muslim women in positions scripted in advance, where veiling is constituted as the equivalent to a victim or voiceless, and oppression that these images work to enforce »⁸⁹.

The veil in the novel is a sacred symbol for the Muslim community⁹⁰. Likewise it symbolizes oppression for the American society. Take Aunt Khadija as an example, a black woman who is a member of the Dawah Center, the veil is a symbol of anti-slavery⁹¹. While Khadija was tying Khadra's scarf for prayer, she shocked the latter by telling her to imagine standing naked in front of a whole bunch of people the way it was back in slavery times on the auction block. By this Khadija showed Khadra the importance of *hijab*. Khadija says, "Covering up is a strong thing" (25). Khadra expresses her affection of being "in this forest of women in hijab, their Khimars and saris and jilbabs and thobes and depattas fluttering and sweeping the floor and reaching out to everything" (55). Khadra's first real *hijab* was described as: "The sensation of being hijabed was a thrill... Hijab was a crown on her head. She went forth lightly and went forth heavily into the world, carrying the weight of a new grace. Hijab soon grew to

⁸⁹ Alia Al-Saji *The racialization of Muslim veils: A philosophical analysis*. McGill University, Canada. 2010,p. 876

⁹⁰ Neil Macfarquhar, "Mohja Kahf - Muslim American - Poet," *The New York Times*, May 12, 2007
<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/12/books/12veil.html>.

⁹¹ Marques P.Carine "Mohja Kahf's:The Girl In The Tangerine Scarf Seen Through The Hijab Perspective" *Estudos Anglo-Americanos*, no. 37 (2012).p 139

feel as natural to her as a second skin, without which if she ventured into the outside world she felt naked. (112-113) As Rhys Williams and G. Vashi argue:

Hijab carves out a cultural space for young Muslim women to live lives that their mothers could barely have imagined...and still to be publicly Muslim....These young women are active agents and are able, to some degree, to create their own lives. *Hijab* helps them to do so, while also keeping them anchored in a traditional identity and avoiding potential anomie.⁹²

Kahf 's narrative is a resistance to western hegemony. A clothing code is thus an important element of identification and attachment and the ban of the veil can be interpreted as an attempt to detach subjects from their land of attachment. Mohja Kahf illustrates how unveiling operates as a means of reinforcing the power dynamics. She uses Syria as an example to demonstrate the way Muslim women had to endure government oppression because of the Islamic veil and how the Ba'ath party of Hafiz al Assad insisted on unveiling as a way of breaching the Muslim Brotherhood party. Kahf uses Khadra's aunt Razanne's story as a historiographical account of the Hama Massacre of 1982. Back in Syria, Khadra learns from Aunt Razanne about the experience of her daughter Reem:

The day the paratroopers tore our veils; you could strip off your hijab and jilbab, or get a gun to your head ... Well Reem was on foot, coming back from the seamstress. She tried to duck into the lobby of an apartment building but it was the buzzer kind and she couldn't get in ... The paratrooper grabs her by the arm, with a soldier right beside her. She slips off the scarf right away. Why endanger your life for it? But then, the paratrooper barks at her to take off her manteau, too. Well my Reem is only wearing a cami and half-slip under the manteau that day, as it happens... With the soldier prodding her with the rifle, she starts to unbutton. She is mortified ... So the paratrooper can't even wait for Reem to take off her clothes. So she rips off the manteau herself, and holds it up in the air and sets it on fire with a blowtorch. (281)

The paratroopers' ferocious order for veiled women shocks Khadra but makes her understand how exile was the only alternative for her parents and how such a decision was important for her

⁹² Rhys Williams and Gira Vashi, "Hijab and American Muslim Women: Creating the Space for Autonomous Selves," *Sociology of Religion* 68.3 (Fall, 2007):p 283.

parents who were eager to stay true to themselves. Even though Razanne's husband Uncle Mazen tersely comments that it was those dissidents like Khadra's parents who politicized hijab and have made life hell for them, Khadra explains that her parents "stood taller in her sight," and that at least "they had not stooped. Had not twisted their minds to fit into a cramped space, had not shrunk themselves like poor Uncle Mazen and Aunt Razanne" (282). Being proud of her parents' dissidence and her mother's refusal to take off her hijab are elements that define *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* as a counter-hegemonic narrative of resistance that defies Western interpretations of the Muslim veiled woman.

This *Veil or hijab* is more than a cover for women's head. The word "hijab" in Arabic means a "border", as it is made by the writer to show that the real border is created between the Muslim community and the Indiana society, is itself like a veil. A border that caused racism and harassment to the people of Muslim community by children and adults of Indian society. And the most shocking act of racism in the novel is killing one of Khadra's friends, Zuhra, the African-American Muslim, by the Ku Klux Klan who was never caught. Killing the friend from the Dawah Center was the first event that changed Khadra's life and views about her identity.

Zuhra was a clever, strong, independent, and free-thinking young woman. She used to argue everything with the grownups. She once reminded the zoning inspector that "zoning law has often been used as a tool to keep people of other races out"(43). Khadra tells us, "Zuhra was not accustomed to being brushed aside... She was likely to question you, man or woman, even if you had an air of authority, and she did so with an attitude that assumed her objections would be addressed" (43). Zuhra was murdered and raped only some days after her engagement party. There were "Cuts on her hands, her hijab and clothes in shreds" (93). Although it was a rape, the attack is not sexual as much as it is political and religious against an African and a Muslim

woman. The national media, which had to be neutral, seemed to stand on the side of the white murderers. They never mentioned in the news, for example, that the victim was a Muslim girl or even an African rather they described her as a “foreign woman,” not an American resident but an “international student” (95). They even accused her Middle Eastern fiancé of honor killing saying that this an act of «oppression of women in Islam” (97). All this caused Khadra to question her identity.

Khadra's community was no less racist than the Indiana society. For example, they condemned Zuhra silently and doubted her when she was lost. Before finding her, they said that if she is found alive, she is ruined (92). They whispered that her parents should have given her more guidance and that she asked for trouble because of her liberal attitude (96). In the same way, the community gossiped about Khadra and her parents did not talk to her when she had an abortion. Although she was in the first months of her pregnancy and abortion was allowed in these months by the Islamic law, as she explained to a friend (224-225). Racism on the part of her Muslim community is also seen when her brother, Eyad, wanted to marry a very religious, educated, beautiful, and a clever young woman. However, the bride was not suitable for his family just because “she's black as coal!” (139). The American society and the Muslim community chattered Khadra's ideals. In school, Khadra was attacked by a bunch of boys. One of them took off her veil in a scene that reminds us of Zuhra's shredded veil. Khadra insisted on holding on to her veil although it was torn into pieces. Covering her hair with a dirty torn scarf here becomes a symbol of challenge “She didn't want to give anyone in this building the satisfaction of seeing her bareheaded” (125).

"In its extreme, Khadra's veil becomes political"⁹³. The black veil which she wore during

⁹³ Barbara J. Hampton. "Free to be Muslim-Americans: Community, Gender, and Identity in *Once in a Promised Land*, *The*

her teenage years was a revolution against “traditional Islamic scholarship, with its tedious, plodding chapters on categories of water purity and how to determine the exact end of menses” (150). “Islam is action in the world!” (150). For her, there had to be a “*revolutionary path*” instead of “*the moderate Islamic revival movement*” of her parents (150). At the time of wearing the black scarf, she was cheering for assassinations and the Iranian Revolution. It seemed that Khadra wanted to be like this “*one scarf-wearing woman*” who took, with other men, some American hostages during the revolution (119). Khadra's black veil, in this period, was an expression for hating America and a willingness to attack it. After visiting Mecca during Hajj, Khadra's veil and perspective to life changed completely. When she was in Saudi Arabia, she was shocked by the version of Islam seen there. Although she had a spiritual experience there, she was faced with some sexist acts. For example, she discovered that women were not allowed to pray in the mosque. She was also sexually harassed by Saudi teenagers. As a result, when she came back from Saudi Arabia, her decision was to change her dark hijab to a white one with tiny flowers. *She shoved her black scarf with other dark clothes to the back of the closet and got rid of all the political and revolutionary books and cassettes she had. She also started to see what she once called “McMuslims”*(186).

The lighter scarf was a symbol of love and understanding. This period ended with accepting marriage from a Kuwaiti student in the US, Juma. Khadra's marriage seemed perfect as she married a committed Muslim who would bring peace to her life and help her get rid of the racism she felt outside. However, Khadra who was seen too Muslim by the Americans was seen too American and too feminist by her community and her husband. In her marriage, she refused

to do traditional feminine tasks. Moreover, she refused to quit riding her bike to the university and stop campus demonstrations the way her husband demanded. "Every time she went out in a campus demonstration, Juma complained. "Does it have to be you?" he asked. "Let somebody else demonstrate. There's no shortage of people. Does it have to be my wife?" (244). And most shocking to Juma, Khadra had an abortion against the expectations of her husband and her community. Juma did not like her Western style, so they got a divorce and Khadra felt relieved: "can't go on in the marriage without killing off the 'me' that I am" (242).

When Khadra's identity was collapsing, she went to Syria to recollect herself. There, she became more aware of her identity. In Damascus, she stayed with Teta, a strong and a loving woman, a feminist in her moderate attitude. Khadra seemed to identify with her more than with her own mother. Teta led her to new experiences that made her more understanding. Unlike her closed community and the racism of the Indiana people, she witnessed in Syria a harmony that she never encountered before. For example, Teta had a Jewish friend, she visited Sufi mosques with Teta exposing herself to the "faint rhythms of dhikrs" (292). She realized at that moment that life has not got one color or the other; it is not either black or white. It was more like the arch work of the mosque "Dark brick, white stone, dark flesh and white side by side ... as it did everywhere in Damascus's traditional architecture" (292).

It is after that moment in the mosque that Teta bought a tangerine, silk scarf for Khadra from the traditional *Hamadiya* market. Although the scarf stands for heritage and tradition since it was a gift from Teta and it came from a traditional market, it has other meanings. It is like her new experience towards life. "The color" of the scarf is the color of youth, as Teta comments and as her name symbolizes. It is a light color that symbolizes liberty and change. It is like the color of the tangerine candy she bought somewhere else in the novel, all sweetness with a flavor of

love. Later in the novel, she confesses to her friend Tayiba that it is love above all that makes her a Muslim.

This is the same scarf with which she decided to visit Zuhra's grave back in America: “her tangerine depatta draped loosely over her shoulder and fluttering over Zuhra's grave stone” (404). The scarf is an important announcement of the new ideas Khadra assumed. It is like a flag of victory upon a castle, and that castle is none but the grave of her brave friend who was a victim of racism. Khadra becomes as strong as her dead friend. She was even more optimistic and more open towards the future. Khadra's new identity is stressed when Zuhra's mother, who came with Khadra to Zuhra's grave, asked the latter to forgive her and other adults for imposing their identities on her and the other children of the Dawah Center: “And we were idealistic, oof! Full of zeal! But we put it all on you. Too much. Wanting you to carry our vision for us, our identity – our entire identity, on *your* heads, imagine!” (405).

Pointing out to Zuhra's death, *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* leads to a sociopolitical reading. It brings up the issue of anti-immigrants or racism. Calling Zuhra a ‘foreign woman’ and ‘an international student’ (95) by the media makes Muslim identity collapse into racial, ethnic, or national identities. The portrayal of Islam as an inherently violent, misogynist religion because of some fundamentalist groups is raised by the text. Kahf attempts to explore the underlying factors that have given birth to radical groups. She suggests that the global dimensions of Muslim oppression are motivations driving fundamentalist groups. Khadra's transformations symbolize a multiplicity of Arab and Muslim worldviews. Kahf complicates her position by asking what it means to have “Arab” or “Islamic” customs and cultures ?. She shows these communities to be complex entities that exist beyond caricature. In addition to suggesting that racism prevents immigrants from identifying (emotionally and psychologically) with

Americans, causing their geographical and social segregation, the novel also explores the ways in which it is one of the main reasons behind religious extremism.

This is reinforced by a poet where Khadra meets the poet on Mount Qasyoon in Syria. The poet represents the other within Khadra, a secular voice that seems to come right out of her gut”(301). The voice accused her of getting away from God: “your veil is very revealing, you know,” although it insisted, “but veiling is important, definitely”(302). The poet emphasized the importance of not veiling one's face and expression, that whether veiled or not, she was loved by God, that her heart was the place of real religion, and that “Better lost than false”(302). The poet's voice encouraged her to see her inner true self.

Khadra did not quit her ideals, she seems to love this multiplicity given to the veil and thus to her identity as a whole: "What if she'd been just a regular Muslim girl trying to make her way through the obstacle course—through the impossible, contradictory hopes the Muslim community had for her, and the infuriating, confining assumptions the Americans put on her? A girl looking for a way to be, just *be*, outside that tug-of-war? (358) It is precisely this multiplicity of meaning given to her veil is what makes her reject assigning meaning to the veil whether as a symbol of ideal or a symbol of oppression⁹⁴.

The writer throughout the novel rejects giving meaning and representation to the veil. Khadra's childhood neighbor and a potential husband, Hakim started to describe his sister as the first Muslim woman to drive race cars, Khadra protested against the use of any act done by her community as a representation of something. "It should not have a certain meaning: Don't say it. Don't put it on her. I'm so tired of everyone putting that on us. Every single thing we do has to

⁹⁴ Layla Al Maleh "Arab Voices in Diaspora Critical Perspectives on Anglophone Arab Literature" Amsterdam - New York, 2009 p 100

'represent' for the community. Zuhra having to Represent this and represent that. Everyone had to put their meaning on her. Just let her be, for God's sake. For the prophet's sake, just let us be. (399) Khadra's protest definitely applies for the veil. For her, the veil which has multiple representations is free of a certain representation. Meaning at the end of the novel becomes circular, like a Sufi love, without end, reaching "*pure surrender*" (441). Judging Arab woman in the light of her beliefs to find out what she represents is a common western view on Arab woman. If a Muslim woman holds certain beliefs that are uncommon in Western culture, she represents a backward ideology, no matter how highly assertive, educated or independent she is; in other words, women are not judged on how they fit within their culture as much as they would fit in a Western culture. This western standard of how a Muslim woman looks like, what relationships she makes what clothes she wears and how western her thoughts are may not be logical since many liberal Muslim still hold conservative and overly religious opinions that fit their cultural lifestyle. Mohja Kahf showed her impatience with the Western view on Arab woman to come to the fore without fear. To show resistance to any label or movement that speaks on behalf of these Arab Muslim women.

Conclusion

In closing, through Khadra's experience, readers may see the veil in different positions having different meanings. It stands for idealism, freedom and revolution, political issues and eventually for love. It offers a different interpretation of the contemporary Islamic women that shows the complex identity that goes beyond the practice of veiling. The veil is an observance of faith that does not define the Islamic female as a subject of oppression. Instead it leads to ask questions and try to understand another culture and faith. The veil should not cease a conversation, but facilitate an acceptance. The novel fosters an environment that leads to this

type of enlightenment by using provocative images of the veil to explore the issues of freedom, identity, and otherness. The veil contains those meanings through a rhythmic shifting between veiling and unveiling .Khadra's feminist self resembles this shift between her different worlds. And nothing in the world can confine all her contradictions except love. Kahf educates women how to develop self- love and not lose themselves to anything or any man or marriage relationship. She expects women to show more interest in themselves.

General Conclusion

In this dissertation I analyzed the diasporic experiences of Khadra and Salwa. It was my aim to prove that each character had her diasporic experience. I investigated the ways in which the diasporic subjects in the novel act differently from each other in this process of attempting to build and define who they are. Moreover, I recognized the important role that gender plays in the novels. Even though diaspora was my main focus, hybridity and gender were always present in the analyses I developed.

Throughout my research, I could notice that each subject comes from different social, economic and family contexts, and, therefore, each of them ends up having different attitudes towards their own hybridity. I have examined the experience of Salwa Haddad. I have concluded that Salwa's journey reflects her failure to carve a place of her own in America. She voluntarily took part in an Americanization process seducing them away from their cultural and religious roots. However, September 11 becomes a turning point in her life because of her fragility and unpreparedness to face the growing marginalization and alienation imposed on her. By profiling of Arab and Muslim Americans, Salwa and Jassim also become separate from one another, which places their marriage and their presence in America on shaky ground. Halaby is critical to this kind of false belonging to the United States, in which the couple abandon the homeland's values in return for a consumer citizenship based on the promise of wealth and prosperity. Despite their efforts to fit in, this national crisis instigates their exclusion. Salwa becomes involved in an affair with an American co-worker, and ends up badly beaten and disfigured by him.

At first, I believed that Salwa had a tendency for assimilation, since she seemed to used reject everything that was related to the Arab culture. However, what I could notice, is that she is a completely lost young woman, who is neither comfortable with the American culture or with the Arab one. Her life is guided by displacement, and she is its victim. This is the biggest

difference between Salwa and Khadra, who have very similar backgrounds, since both of them are Arab immigrants. Khadra really wants to belong to the American culture, trying to assimilate indeed. Throughout my research I could notice that khadra is able to deal with her sense of displacement, something that Salwa couldn't do, she goes through a difficult journey. In order to understand how she negotiates with both the Arab and the American cultures, I tried to investigate all the moments of this journey, and I could conclude that she is only able to achieve some balance after she experiences different levels of proximity with both cultures. Getting closer and actually *knowing* these cultures – different from what happens to Salwa is what enables Khadra to embrace both of them. Besides, I discovered that knowing when to let certain aspects of each culture go also helps Khadra to deal with her sense of displacement.

I concluded that migrant Arab and Muslim women attempt to forge a unified identity through the union of both secular and Islamic tradition. They need to be recognized as capable of ethical behavior and human understanding that connects human beings despite their differences and their otherness. Being human is about being with the likes of oneself while knowing those who are different. Indeed, Khadra and Salwa enact this human condition.

In the end, I find that the reason for writing these stories might be the increased bigotry towards Arab Americans that resulted from the events of 9/11. Mohja Kahf and Laila Halaby want to highlight how the U.S. is made up of diverse races, ethnicities, and identities that need to find a balance and a common ground between them. I hope that my critical analysis of the works will open up new doors for meaning in respect to.

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APPENDIX

Sekiou Haoura: Have you thought of your audience or to whom you want to write for?

Mohja Kahf: I began writing it for my daughters. They are adults now.

Sekiou Haoura: The Moroccan Critic and writer Abdelkebir Khatibi described some francophone writer's works that they are UNTRANSLATED WORKS; by means that these works are strong coz they're written in the language of the other... do you think your works can be considered in the same range?

Mohja Kahf: Yes, it is written in English. I guess it is an untranslated work. At times it delves into very local references. Only people in certain regions of the U.S. call the creature that latches onto Hanifa's foot "a crawdad." Only Damascene women, and women in a few other nearby urban centers, use the term "te'ebriini."

Sekiou Haoura: What does it mean for you to be An Arab American in post 9/11 and Trump's period America?

Mohja Kahf: You're asking me to write another novel, to reply to some of these questions, it seems. "What it means" is in the novel.

Sekiou Haoura: How can we understand Khadra's Personality?

Mohjaa Kahf :How is up to you, the reader.

Sekiou Haoura: Syria seems to have a very important place in your writings. One word about Syria today.

Mohja Kahf: One word about Syria - Cataclysm. Cataclysmic injustice. (That's two words).

Sekiou Haoura: was wondering if you can comment a little bit on your choice of words in the title and the Color Tangerine. Am I correct in reading it as badge that marks Arab American women? If so, to what extent what extent does that color resonate with Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*?

Mohja Kahf: Not really. The title was not my first choice but more the publisher's, having to do with marketability. It is a title of reluctant compromise to realities. My first choice was "Henna'd Hoosiers." They said no one would understand that title. Half would not understand "henna'd" and the other half would not understand "Hoosiers."

Sekiou Haoura: One of the amazing things about *The Girl in the Tangerine scarf* is the epilogues and the style of narrating with those flashbacks from past injected into the narrative present. What was your aim here?

Mohja Kahf: My aim is not the point; what effect does it have on the reader is the point.

Sekiou Haoura: By virtue of working in the US, one can be right in suggesting that Muslim and Arab American writers are often free from certain inhibitions as you engage in deep societal and cultural questions that you would rather refrain from undertaking if you were operating from say the Middle East. Is that correct? I am not referring to political repression only. I have in mind this idea of a Shi'ii praying side by side with a Sunni, for example; the idea of choosing when and where to wear the scarf; the presumed homeliness of Mecca during pilgrimage that dissipates, etc...

Mohja Kahf: All these things are also political.

Sekiou Haoura:By virtue of its daring and deep set of questions, it seems that Muslim and Arab American writings is growing rapidly into a thriving sub-field of American literature. We in the Arabo-Muslim world are learning a lot of interesting insights mainly as to what is to be a Muslim in the contemporary world (not only in the US) How do you react to this statement? Are we (those outside the US setting) justified in learning those insights or it is simply a severe case of misreading and over interpretation? I want some elaboration please.

I wonder if you have had the chance to read Ali Eteraz's latest novel, *Native Believer* (2016). If so, how do you find his proposal of Muslim identity in contemporary America?

Mohja Kahf: Have not read it. Thanks for the suggestion--putting it on my list to read!

Sekiou Haoura; Can you suggest other interesting writers in this subfield for us to read

Mohja Kahf *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*; Randa Jarrar's *A Map of Home*.

Sekiou Haoura: Thank you again and again for your time Madam

Mohja Kahf : thank you . Good luck.