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Women in Cultural Insularity and Anxious Spaces in the Arab and Arab American Contexts in Laila Halaby's *West of the Jordan*

RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

This article, throughout Laila Halaby's *West of the Jordan* (2013), examines the socio-cultural characteristics and conditions that determine the identity construction of Arab women in both the diaspora and the homeland. In other words, it demonstrates how Arab women's identity oscillates between their country of residence – diaspora – and their countries of origin, showcasing the complexity of their belonging. I argue that socio-cultural traditional mechanisms such as conservatism and judgementalism contribute to the positioning of women in the Arab context in a complex cultural insularity and spaces of anxiety, providing multiple readings of Arab female bodies. This article concludes that Halaby's portrayal of Arab women's experiences in her fiction tends to trigger feminist and empathetic engagements. In addition to critical and analytical approaches to the novel, the arguments in this article are based on perspectives of prominent critics and scholars such as Fadda-Carol Conrey, Nadine Naber, and Homi Bhabha, to name just a few, as well as on interviews I conducted with prominent Arab American novelists, namely Rajia Hassib and Laila Halaby.

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Arab American literature in our contemporary times, especially the novel, according to the Arab American literary critic Steven Salaita, has developed “as a formidable art form in the Arab American community” (2011: 2).¹ In Salaita’s view, contemporary Arab American literature “is undergoing something of a qualitative and quantitative maturation” (2011: 2). This particular ethnic literature portrays and represents Arab communities either in diaspora or countries of origin. It also focuses on, and questions, the construction of identities, projecting them as complex and dynamic. Laila Halaby, a prominent Arab American novelist, justifies this claim with her statement on the intersection between the labels Arab and American in an interview conducted by me: “When I was growing up and navigating these labels, Arab-Americans seemed like their own culture. I was two things, never a merged category. With increased immigration, “Arab-American”, to me, is a much more general term than it was once” (Berrebbah, 11). It is worth pointing out that contemporary Arab American literature, as ethnic literature, gained more prominence in post-9/11, a period in which the Arab American community was put under a critical lens (Fadda-Conrey 2014). The Arab American literary critic Lisa Suhair Majaj, for instance, while referring to the community of Arab American authors, says: “we need to take a closer look at the complexity of Arab-American identity (1999: 74). Indeed, understanding this particular identity and its complex formation can be achieved through scrutinizing the contemporary literary productions of the Arab American authors’ community, especially those published after 9/11.

It is necessary to acknowledge that contemporary Arab American writings – especially in the last two decades – are mainly produced by women authors.² Being in the USA gives Arab American women the opportunity to express themselves and voice their concerns either for themselves or for women in their homeland, country of residence and Arabic or Muslim countries; this is due to the necessity of collaboration to resist the inflicting stereotypes against Arab and Muslim women in the USA and the religious and socio-political structures in the Arab world or the diaspora that directly or indirectly oppress and confine women. One of these female authors is Laila Halaby. She has contributed extensively to the literary canon of Arab American community. Besides *West of the Jordan*, she has other published works and forthcoming literary projects. *My Name on His Tongue* (2012), for instance, is a collection of poems that shed light on women who grew up and lived in the United States as Arabs and Americans. The literary output in the making is *Woman, Be My Country*, a novel in which three unlikely characters – Filasteen Salama, Shah Reza, and William Wallace – experience the ramifications of war, and their names, which represent a heavy burden to carry, have had a profound effect on their choices. *Watching the Girl You Love Walk Away with Charlie Manson* demonstrates a year of grief in 12 stories that take place in the year after Trump’s election. Also, *The Weight of Ghosts* is a memoir under consideration for publication.³

West of the Jordan is her most notable work. The novel tells the story of four Arab female cousins of Palestinian origin in their adolescent years. These are Soraya and Khadija who live in the USA, Hala who lives between Jordan and the USA, mainly Arizona, and Mawal who lives in a Palestinian small traditional village known as Nawara. They experience various difficult situations, whether cultural, political, social, or economic. The title of this novel, as the Arab American literary critic Steven Salaita points out, “denotes both geography and political orientation” (2011: 79). It is worth pointing out that this article builds on and contributes to the existing research outputs that critically assess Halaby’s novel *West of the Jordan*.

1 It is worth pointing out, as Lisa Suhair Majaj argues, that in the 19th and 20th centuries “Arab American writers have produced more poetry than prose because, as a small and beleaguered ethnic group, writers have only recently begun to feel established enough to turn to serious literary endeavours and have not, therefore, set in place for themselves the kind of support systems, both economic and social, needed for the writing of fiction” (2008: 127). It was only in the beginning of the 21st century that Arab American fiction started expanding.

2 It is worth pointing out that the majority of Arab American authors are women. Works from female authors are more welcomed than their male counterparts because the latter are seen by American publishers **as more dangerous in terms of ideological quality**. In this context, Layla Dowlatshahi, a Muslim American playwright of Iranian origin, says: “Growing up in this country, I’ve always sensed there’s been a fear of Muslim men, and any kind of ethnic minority, especially male. They’re seen as a threat. It’s easier to acclimate to a female Arab or Muslim voice than to jump to a male” (qtd in Schillinger 2004). In *Theatre: The New ‘Arab’ Playwrights*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/04/04/theater/theater-the-new-arab-playwrights.html>.

3 Halaby’s literary contributions has been extracted from my interview with her. It is published in *Commonwealth Essays and Studies*.

Selected major examples of these are Lina Maloul's "The Construction of Palestinian Muslim Masculinities in Two Novels by Laila Halaby and Randa Jarrar" (2019) and Marta Bosch's "The Representation of Fatherhood by the Arab Diaspora in the United States" (2008). The former shows how Palestinian masculinities and patriarchies are represented and projected in Laila Halaby's *West of the Jordan* and Randa Jarrar's *A Map of Home*. The latter, Marta Bosch, analyses Alecia Erian's *Towelhead* (2015), Laila Halaby's *West of the Jordan* (2003), and Diana Abu-Jaber's *Arabian Jazz* (1993) in order to explore how Arab fatherhood is represented in the US diaspora. She concludes that the notion of fatherhood, particularly in the Arab context, is shifting to new understandings. However, a proper focus on the representations and status of women in Arab context is lacking, either in diaspora or homeland. Scrutinizing women's issues and their complex position in Arab community throughout *West of the Jordan* is as important as researching men's identities.

I argue, in addition to patriarchy and sexism that afflict women's lives in the Arab context (Faqr 2001; Inhorn 2012), that conservatism and socio-cultural judgementalism play a role in hardening the experiences of women in both their homeland and the diaspora. These two notions are heavily entrenched in many cultures around the world but they vary in the degree that they affect women's lives and their identity poetics. *West of the Jordan*, as such, introduces us to these two interconnected frameworks to provide a deep insight into the socio-cultural characteristics of Arab society, demonstrating a critique of how conservatism and judgementalism contribute to the positioning of women in cultural turbulence and spaces of anxiety such as 'liminal space' and 'peripherality'. The former mostly appears in the setting of the diaspora – the USA – and the latter manifests itself in the country of origin: Palestine and Jordan – two neighbouring countries that share similar societal and cultural structures.

Liminality, generally speaking, within literary criticism, "signifies a condition of being at a threshold or limit, spatially or temporally. Textual analysis of liminality draws attention to the passage across limits, boundaries or thresholds in narratives, where the limit being crossed is constituted as an assemblage of culturally significant values" (Julian Wolfreys et al 61). It has been extensively discussed by the literary and cultural critic Homi Bhabha in his *The Location of Culture* (1994). By using Renee Green's approach to architecture to understand identities of difference, Bhabha defines liminal space as "inbetween the designations of identity" (4). It is an outcome of cultural difference. According to him, this space "opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity" (4).

Peripherality is related to a group of individuals whose self-realization is ascribed to the state of marginalization, estrangement, isolation, alienation, and socio-cultural exclusion based on certain criteria and factors. This group is categorized in accordance to certain values and features and is distanced from the centre of a particular community or society. These two concepts – liminality and peripherality – are applicable to female characters' experiences in *West of the Jordan* through their negotiation of and struggle with the socio-cultural frameworks of conservatism, which entails a strong attachment to cultural traditions, and judgementalism, which is practiced towards an individual who performs or demonstrates a moral or cultural behaviour that goes against the norms of the society or its culture. Arab culture, as Philip Carl Salzman explains, "is both a brilliant construction of human creativity and a practical response to many human problems [...] Arab culture, like other cultures, is a way of construing the world, the universe, society, and [men and women]. It is, at the same time, a matrix of meaning, a framework for understanding, and a plan for action" (837). Salzman, moreover, describes Arab culture that exists in the central Middle East⁴ in a positive sense, as being "characterized by a particular form of social control which has a major impact on human experiences and social life" (838). The narratives in *West of the Jordan*, however, demonstrate a contested image of such social control through different articulations of judgementalism – intracultural criticism – and conservatism by both female and male characters, in the diaspora and homeland. In addition to this, this article aims to demonstrate the extent to which traditional culture affects Arab women's identity as well as how Arab women's identity oscillates between the setting of diaspora and original homelands. This article also critically explores the sociocultural factors that position women in liminality and spaces of anxiety. Moreover, it aims to investigate the

⁴ Jordan and Palestine are a good example of central Middle East. *West of the Jordan* presents them as two socio-cultural realms where the characters come from – original homelands.

authorial agenda of Laila Halaby behind the portrayal of women's experiences and their status. The arguments and analytical readings in this essay will broaden our understanding of what constitutes and affects women's identity as well as what deteriorates their position in their own community as manifested in Laila Halaby's novel.

WOMEN IN SPACES OF SOCIAL ANXIETY: WHEN TRADITIONAL CULTURE BECOMES A BURDEN

The female characters in *West of the Jordan*, because of the rigid sociocultural traditional mechanisms they confront, "find themselves in a state of liminality, an existence in different spaces without feeling completely whole in either—an in-between state of being" (Salaita 2011, 85). Hala, for instance, introduces us to the judgementalist attitude of her society in the village of Nawara, which the narrator describes as a 'thick-headed village', when she departs the USA and goes back for her mother's funeral. After her arrival she quickly realizes that she is under a critical lens because she seems Americanized and no longer a perpetuator of Palestinian heritage and social values. Hala reflects on this when she says:

I feel a mixture of relief and fatigue to be back. So many relatives and neighbours coming to pay their respects [...] I know they see me with curious eyes. I left before marrying age [...] I should not wear blue jeans and "extremely unfeminine dresses," as Aunt Suha says. I should stop using English words. [...] I am unconnected. There is comfort to be in my own house, to wake up in my own language, but all those faces I've carried with me for so long wear suspicion in their eyes as they greet me. I have walked so far away from them". (Halaby 77)

Hala knows that she does not meet her society's expectations, and this is probably due to the state of her identity that has been distorted by her stay in the USA. She is culturally and socially confused because she has acquired a new way of living and negotiating life. She consequently considers herself as an intruder in the village of Nawara or an ambiguous insider who no longer fits in her zone of comfort. She consciously positions herself in a peripheral position or the margin in which her unconnectedness to her community does not bother her. She describes herself happy but unconnected, "like a charm without a chain to hang from" (Halaby 83). In other words, she is satisfied by her unbelonging to her village. She knows that her stay in the village of Nawara might make her feel differently and this would make her look like her mother, "The Woman of Unfulfilled Dreams" (Halaby 83). Hala, alternatively, decides to be like her uncle Hamdi, "The Voice of Reason And Capitalism" (Halaby 83). In another sense, Hala chooses America over the village of Nawara. Hala's choice to accept her unbelongingness and to reconsider her identification, however, does not mean that it will not lead to consequences. Her choice, effectively, contributes to broadening the gap between herself and her kin community and even her relatives in the village. As such, Hala's view of her belonging reflects a transnational outlook that not only shows how she problematically connects to her original homeland but also how she affirms her American identity and, probably, American citizenship. It is possible, in this context, to recall Carol Fadda-Conrey's argument on the contemporary transnational outlook that Arab Americans hold. She argues that "Arab-Americans' connections to the Arab world cease to be the ostracizing factor that prohibit them from asserting US belonging [...] these transnational connections to original Arab homelands become the main discursive vehicle for defying exclusionary and uniform types of US citizenship" (3). In this regard, transnational belonging becomes a factor that determines much of Hala's identity, as being both American and Arab-Palestinian. By the same token, Hala introduces us to other aspects in her narration which affirm the framework that circumscribes individuals who do not respect or act in accordance with the traditional and conservative conventions. This concerns Soraya, Hala's relative, who lives in the USA.

Soraya comes to the village of Nawara to attend a wedding but she ends up in the same situation with Hala – being under a critical lens from judgementalist perspectives. This appears when Soraya starts dancing in front of the attendees and performs provocative twist and shakes that "invite the viewer to watch more closely" (Halaby 82). Her tight Western dress makes things even worse. Her negligence of the norms and values of this occasion makes "people say vicious things about Soraya and what she does" (Halaby 82). Latifa, Hala's sister,

describes Soraya as shameful: “Look at Soraya. Can you believe she dances like that with no shame?” (Halaby 82). The way Soraya is viewed makes Hala sad in that she feels “something bad is going to happen to her” (Halaby 82). For Hala, this is because “she does the things people are scared of” (Halaby 82). Hala says this because she knows that what Soraya does threatens the nativism, and conservative nature of behaviour and attitude in the village of Nawara’s social events. Both Soraya and Hala project the poetics of their foreignness onto their supposed motherland. This may show that straddling two different cultures – American and Arab – is unsuccessful and that these cultures are not compatible, and this critical situation, consequently, does not fully serve their needs and social positions in their country of origin. This is simply because their nativism, according to the society in the village of Nawara, has been negatively re-configured by their country of residence – the USA. In the opinion of older people, Palestinian women in the USA, such as Soraya, “are not supposed to be living an American life” (Halaby 31). What happens to Soraya and Hala is similar to Khadra Shamy in Mohja Kahf’s *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006). The latter experiences the same ostracizing factors when she goes from Indiana to Mecca to perform Haj – pilgrimage – and finds herself confronting the societal system of criticism and conservatism that control women and their behaviour. Khadra feels disrespected in her Arab community in Mecca because she has settled in the USA and has American affiliation and belonging. This encourages Khadra to draw a line between others and herself in terms of social differences and cultural understandings, and also belonging. She feels trapped by the politics of otherization in her own community.

The politics of otherization on the basis of judgementalism and traditional conventions, furthermore, situates Hala and her relative Soraya in the village of Nawara in a peripheral space, creating a borderline between them and their community. In other words, being regarded as insiders and intruders because of their inconvenient social and cultural behaviours outgroups them, given that they both share American affiliation. This denotes a clash between social structure and individual agency, or in another sense, a disconnection between individual identity and collective identity. This also makes Hala and Soraya reflect on their social identity and the anxious dynamics of social places they occupy in their country of origin. Their identity combines how they see themselves and how others see them. In her critique of ‘identity’ as a notion and a social construct Kath Woodward states: “Identity provides a link between individuals and the world in which they live. Identity combines how I see myself and how others see me. Identity involves the internal and the subjective, and the external. It is a socially recognized position, recognized by others, not just by me” (2000: 7). In this context, Hala and Soraya are viewed and scrutinized by others’ perceptions in their community in a way that further determines the formation of their identity which is unsuccessfully positioned. As Woodward goes on to argue, “Material, social and physical constraints prevent us from successfully presenting ourselves in some identity position – constraints which include the perceptions of others” (7). Such perceptions, in the case of Hala and Soraya, are based on certain cultural standards, the pragmatics of conservatism, and the poetics of judgementalism.

In addition, what happens to Soraya and Hala is an example of intergroup relations that is determined by socio-cultural perceptions in the Arab context. In other words, their social identity formation depends on the attitudes of other members of society in the village of Nawara, attitudes which generate two categories – the first is of those who are regarded as native individuals with authentic norms and values and the second is of those who are deemed as intruders with culturally distorted nativity and mis-accentuated Arab authenticity. The latter category applies to Soraya and Hala. In their chapter titled “Social Identity Complexity and Out-group Attitude” Katharina Schmidt and Miles Hewstone provide a statement that can be supported by what happens in the village of Nawara. They claim that “when individuals rely less on a single category, the likelihood for the occurrence of intergroup discrimination is lower, while the likelihood for positive intergroup attitudes becomes greater” (82). In the case of the village of Nawara individuals rely more on a single category – the first one as stated above – and this might cause negative attitudes towards other categories. As such, socio-cultural perceptions, as being characterized by conservatism and judgementalism, do politicize the relations between the society members in that they become viewed under certain categories.

However, categorizing Hala and Soraya and critically perceiving them because of their dual identity and affiliation in the village of Nawara seems an invalid excuse. Other women are regarded to be in the same category and received the same negative attitude despite their

authentic belonging to the Village. Um-Lubna, for instance, used to be called as Um-Khalid after her son Khalid, but she changed it after her mentally ill daughter (mother of Lubna) which is unacceptable for the people in the village of Nawara, taking into consideration their traditional and conservative norms: “why on earth would she want to be called Um Lubna?” (Halaby 64), Um-Radwan asks in her conversation with Abu-Khuder the merchant. Um-Lubna’s original name is Safa. She lost her family in a tragic accident: “her husband, two sons, and parents were killed when their truck exploded after being hit by another truck” (64). After realizing this Um-Radwan provides a judgemental perception of Um-Lubna: “Imagine severing your son’s name from you! It is shameful. Nothing has changed. She is just as insolent as ever, causing any scandal she can, doing exactly as she pleases instead of doing what is right” (Halaby 64). Later, many people start to notice the changes in Um-Lubna. Mawal tells us that “she was seen more and more often around the village in outrageous *rozas* [...] tight around her belly with a bra underneath to keep her breasts from sagging, and she would be walking with gaiety in her step” (Halaby 66). People in the village of Nawara start questioning and commenting, echoing rumours that she is committing promiscuous acts and threatening the honour of the village by scandals. There is no clear justification of Um-Lubna’s behaviour, but it can be regarded as an attempt to revolt against the constraining traditions that determine how a widowed woman should act or behave both in the public and domestic sphere.

Safa, or Um-Lubna as labelled in narratives, feels that her life needs change and that mourning the loss of her family will add only misery, without forgetting the burden of raising a mentally-ill girl who everybody looks at with repugnance. Such a shift in Um-Lubna’s life works as a factor that further distances her from the rest of the people in the village, positioning her in a space of peripherality, where she feels isolated and marginalised by the ostracizing attitudes and views of her kin community. The text in this regard appears to critique how the relationship between society members is based on and characterized by intergroup and intragroup perceptions and judgements in the Arab context, drawing on the village of Nawara. It introduces the idea that women are the most affected category of such mechanisms .i.e. conservatism and judgementalism, given that questions of honour and chastity are often linked to them. Indeed, the idea that women are the most affected category in society is endorsed by the experience of another female character in the village of Nawara, Aunt Farah. The narratives in *West of the Jordan* tell us how Aunt Farah invokes her memory of when she was young and was forced to marry a man against her will. Her memory reveals that she was treated violently by her husband who aggressed her with “fists that pounded her with welts to cover her body, welts she ignored or covered, until it broke her father’s heart and he convinced her husband to release her with divorce to freedom” (2003: 51). One possible understanding of why Aunt Farah ignored and covered her welts is to hopelessly avoid divorce and failure of her marriage. This is because she knew society would hold her accountable and blame her. It is an attempt to cope with her society’s structure that regards divorced women – failed wives – with judgmental perspectives and critical perceptions, especially by other women. In fact, in my interview with her, the Arab American novelist Rajia Hassib sustains this point about how women judge/criticize other women in the Arab context within traditional culture. She says:

Women sometimes are policed by other women not necessarily by men. So that’s something I noticed a lot about women, in Egyptian society for example, how they would blame the wife for the husband infidelity. It is like ‘oh she was not paying enough attention to him’. These are subtle contrary narratives that are spread by women. There are also judgments that women put on each other and how they expect a good woman to do”. (Berrebbah 2021)

Aunt Farah’s way of handling her situation, in addition, is because of the “traditional cultural belief concerning the inferiority of women; the social negative attitude to lodging a complaint about the husband, the father, or the brother” (Ennaji and Sadiqi 5) and also because “in Arab society, divorce is viewed as a statement of failure, where the responsibility is placed mainly on the wife, who is considered ‘rebellious, non-complaint, and not heeding the advice of her husband and her family’” (Muhammad Haj-Yahia 740). Aboulhassan and Brumley, furthermore, purport that “cultural narratives in the Arab world suggest that women are restricted to the role of housewife and mother and must maintain strong ties to families” (2018: 2).

Equally important, critical attitudes and perceptions are not restricted to the individuals in the village of Nawara only, but they are also perpetuated towards the USA and American society. America, in the narratives, is portrayed not only as a threat to the values and traditions of the village of Nawara and the nativism of its people, but a bait that allures the young men of the village who, eventually, do not come back when they settle there.⁵ In the chapter titled “America” Mawal tells us how she and her kin view America: “You would think our village was in love with America with all the people who have left, like America is the best relative in the world that everyone has to visit. America is more like a greedy neighbour who takes the best out of you and leaves you feeling empty” (96). What Mawal means by her words is the loss of men to America – of those who usually take care of their farms and families and protect the village of Nawara. They choose to immigrate to America, as Mawal opines, “not just to become wealthy, but to survive” (98). America, however, taints their sense of home and weakens their connections to traditions and heritage and, upon their return to homeland, they crave going back. On this matter, Mawal’s grandmother says: “the problem was that the minute they got here with their eyes that had been trained to see glitter, they criticized their old houses, and they grumbled about the old ways of the village that seemed to come from the time of Muhammad himself” (Halaby 98–99). The American society is also introduced in narratives as cruel and evil (Halaby 109–110).

It is possible to justify such negative images of the USA by Palestinian characters as a ramification of mainly political reasons and history, given that, as Rasheed El-Enany points out, the USA

emerged as a superpower at the end of the Second World War with growing interests in the Middle East, and as the State of Israel was established with the active support of the United States in 1948, and as it continued to have that support in its repeated wars with Arab states, notably in 1967 and 1973, the image of the United States in the Arab world on the whole and consequently in its representations in literary creations began to change radically towards the negative. (153–154)

However, it is worth pointing out that the image of America in narratives is also constructed from a positive perspective. It is regarded by some people in the village of Nawara as a land of opportunities, money, success, and also a place from which to get resources for the fight against Israeli settlers. Mawal’s grandmother for instance looks at money coming from America by Palestinian expatriates as an extra support to her village and its inhabitants. She says: “It was like a proof to the Israelis that we could not be vanquished: we also had American dollars being channelled in to turn our dirt roads to tar and our rubble to mosques” (Halaby 100). Through the narratives we can understand that America also occupies a constructive role in the lives of Palestinians, particularly the people in the village of Nawara. The text thus critiques both the dissentious views of Arabs towards each other – on the basis of complex paradigms and mechanism such as conservatism – and also their views towards the USA which ultimately welcomes and hosts their expatriates and exiles for a better life. This, to some extent, manifests Laila Halaby’s affiliation to both cultures and social hemispheres. This can also be regarded as a double critique towards such poetics of perceptions .i.e. how individuals in the village of Nawara regard members of their kin community and also the USA and its culture. It could be possible, in this regard, to hypothesize that Laila Halaby disapproves such perceptions because they just broaden the gap between cultures across-borders – such as Arab and American – and also threaten the stability of the social hierarchical system in Arab society, as seen in the village of Nawara, regardless of certain motives that fuel such perceptions such as conservatism and the aim to preserve authenticity.

In addition, the poetics and politics of conservatism and judgementalism and their consequent ramifications also appear in the USA, a setting of diaspora. The ultimate fear that haunts the Arab traditional family in the USA is that American culture and its products that are irreconcilable with the values and norms of, for instance, Khadija’s family – a typical conservative Arab family in Arizona. Khadija tells us how she is caught reading adult magazines by her mother. The latter becomes furious and rebukes her daughter severely: “Ma slapped my face, cursed me, cursed America, cursed my father, and cursed God” (Halaby 152). Khadija also finds herself

5 By this *West of the Jordan* also shows us that Samuel Huntington’s thesis of *Clash of Civilizations* (1993) is still prevalent. This clash is exemplified by the USA and the Arab world; both of them represent Western and Eastern geo-cultural hemispheres respectively. This clash is fuelled by cultural representations and stereotypes.

prevented from spending a night at the house of her American friend Pasty. She knows that her father, on the one hand, would probably hit her just for asking (Halaby 173). Her mother, on the other hand, says: “you are not going to sleep anywhere outside this family until the day you are married” (Halaby 173). Her mother’s reaction is basically because of the fear that her daughter, Khadija, would lose her virginity if she sleeps with a boy at her American friend’s house: “your husband has to be the one to take it from you [...] otherwise you are a disgrace to us and we are stuck with you forever [...] you shameful” (Halaby 179). In the context of Khadija’s mother’s words, Sarah Abboud et al, in their article titled “Navigating Virginites: Enactment of Sexual Agency among Arab Women in the USA” (2019), demonstrate their opinion that “in Arab societies heterosexuality and compulsory virginity before marriage are traditionally understood as ideals for a ‘good’ Arab girl, a ‘good’ Arab family and, consequently, a ‘good’ Arab society” (1104). These critics further purport that such an understanding is also perpetuated in diasporas, such as the Arab American. The Arab sociologist Nadine Naber also purports that virginity is an essential criterion “of an idealized Arab womanhood” (93). Khadija, in this regard, realizes that she cannot act against the rubrics of her Arab conservative culture, and that her willingness to engage with American culture, and her celebration of sexuality, would be monitored by her parents. Khadija’s situation reflects much of Salam Aboulhassan and Krista Brumley argument that the experiences of Arab women in the US diaspora are affected by their communal traditional structure as it exists in the Arab world (2–3). Her self-actualization is determined by the demands of her conservative family and Arab traditional culture. She can neither fulfil a belonging to the American society nor a full submission to her original traditional culture that seems to tighten her space of identity negotiation. This does not mean that she positions herself in the third space as Homi Bhabha calls it .i.e. between two cultures. She instead finds herself distanced from both.

It is possible to justify Khadija’s parents’ attitude towards the cultural negotiation of their daughter as an attempt to establish a process of preserving the authenticity of their Arab cultural belonging, and also, to some extent, due to their negative views of American society or ‘the American other’. Upon her reflections on the several experiences she went through within the “bicultural Arab American familial and communal context” (87), the literary and cultural critic Nadine Naber states that “*Al Amerikan* (Americans) were often referred to in derogatory sexualized terms. It was the trash culture-degenerate, morally bankrupt, and not worth investing in” (87). In this context, Khadija’s family tends to carefully re-appropriate how they assimilate into the wider American society. Moreover, it is clear how Arab American femininity is echoed through Khadija’s family in that she, as a daughter, is regarded responsible for preserving and perpetuating Arab traditions, values, and heritage. This argument falls within Nadine Naber’s ethnographic research among middle-class Arab American families and community networks in San Francisco, USA. Through her research she concludes that “the theme of female sexuality tended to be utilized as part of some Arab immigrant families’ selective assimilation strategy in which the preservation of Arab cultural identity and assimilation to American norms of “whiteness” were simultaneously desired” (88). Naber further adds that “within this strategy, the ideal of reproducing cultural identity was gendered and sexualized and disproportionately placed on daughters” (2006: 88). In other words, as Naber notes, “a daughter’s rejection of an idealized notion of Arab womanhood could signify cultural loss and thereby negate her potential as capital within this family strategy” (88). As such, Khadija can be regarded as a point of strength for her family to preserve Arab identity and re-authenticate her culture in the US context and also as a point of weakness in that she might threaten her family strategy if she does not accept her traditional and conservative nature of her culture. This suggests that she is burdened by both her family and also community expectations to carry on transmitting and translating the Arab culture in a context characterized by multicultural discourse. Such cultural policies as imposed on women, I argue, are a factor that further positions them in a liminal space which seems to provide a disorienting vision to Khadija in her process of understanding her identity in the diaspora. This, furthermore, taking into account Naber’s ethnographic research, confirms to us that *West of the Jordan* is a genuine reflection of reality and a mirror of Arab American community’s daily experiences.

In addition, Khadija’s family’s adherence to traditional Arab culture and conservative values in diaspora projects a sort of generational conflict. This, in effect, creates a generational gap between Khadija and her parents. Such generational conflict is apparent through various forms, for instance, the use of language. The novel shows us that Khadija and her mother argue with

each other over the use of Arabic language and the necessity to speak it because it represents their/her identity and origin. This happens when Khadija becomes annoyed at the way her classmates and Social Studies teacher regard her due to her origin:

Ma and I have the same argument, only she gets really mad: 'you are Palestinian,' she says in Arabic. 'You are Palestinian,' I tell her in English. 'I am American.' 'You are Palestinian and you should be proud of that.' 'Ma, I can't speak Arabic right, I've never even been there, and I don't like all of those dancing parties. I like stories and movies. I can be American and still be your daughter.' 'No! No daughter of mine is American.' [...] She is always telling Baba how shameful it is that I don't speak my language. (Halaby 74)

This heated debate between Khadija and her mother tells us about the extent to which the sense of belonging is determined by certain cultural markers such as language. For Khadija, English is her key tool to assimilate and regard herself as a part of the American society. For her mother, Arabic language is the essence of her family's identity construction and origin, and being unable to speak it is shameful. This informs us on how such generational conflict is characterized in modern times, especially in the setting of diaspora. This also informs us on how assimilation differs from old generation to new one. In this context, the Arab American critic Lisa Suhair Majaj in her "Boundaries: Arab/American" (1994) talks about her endeavours to negotiate her hyphenated identity as a woman in the diaspora where the preservation of Arab culture and its conservative nature supersedes other priorities. She argues that, unlike boys, girls often face some "claustrophobic familial restrictions" when they are deemed to engage with western identity (72). In other words, Arab women in the diaspora, within an Arab context, are trapped in cultural insularity and burdened by restrictive cultural codes. What happens between Khadija and her parents, furthermore, in terms of the debates on the use of Arabic or sleeping over, is a manifestation of how they negotiate their assimilation into the American culture. Their assimilation is characterized by cultural and moral restrictions, mainly conservative. Khachig Tololyan in a similar context, in his "The Contemporary Discourse of Diaspora Studies", provides an explanation of how some modern diasporas are integrated within the larger communities of their host countries. He argues that "when possible, diasporic communities seek integration and citizenship without assimilation. They do this by policing their own communal boundaries and encouraging endogamy and bilingualism, strict adherence to traditions, and displays of loyalty to old and new identities, however hybridized" (650).

Indeed, such communal boundaries to control the level of assimilation are also projected through certain cultural markers such as food. Khadija for instance tells us how she feels cheerful when her American friend's mother brings in a bucket full of fried chicken: "I was excited because we never get to eat food from outside" (Halaby 150). This shows that her family avoids American fast food as an act of non-assimilation, sticking to traditional culinary practice as an act of preserving authenticity, maintaining conservative values, and celebrating their original culture. Such an approach by Khadija's family, in terms of embracing the linguistic and culinary practices of their mother culture, can further be clarified throughout Vijay Agnew's statement: "to resist assimilation into the host country, and to avoid social amnesia about their collective histories, diasporic people attempt to revive, recreate, and invent their artistic, linguistic, economic, religious, cultural, and political practices and productions" (193). Food as a cultural marker, moreover, also plays out in a diasporic experience of another female character, Soraya. The latter demonstrates her liberal thought and also her contestation of the conservative structure of her community when she finds herself struggling to opt for what is halal (permissible) and avoid what is haram (forbidden). In other words, she finds herself exhaustedly negotiating two cultural affiliations: Arab-Muslim and American: "I am so sick of everything being Haram or halal, but nothing in between, I am in between" (Halaby 117). The in-betweenness that Soraya refers to is a place of anxiety, or a liminal space, in which the poetics of her identity construction seems convoluted. This shows her hybrid identity and also, importantly, the resultant sense of double consciousness .i.e. being both Arab and American. Drawing on Khadija and Soraya's experiences, the novel projects a conflict between conservatism and liberalism in accordance to the explored generational gap.

In addition, Soraya, in the section titled "Fire", provides a narration by which we can understand that she revolts against the cultural conservative nature of her Arab community in the USA,

particularly her family. She manages to explore new realities outside the boundaries of her communal conservative family, either patriarchal or traditional:

This year I told my family a thousand and a one lies and went to a disco and danced for a beautiful man who came to love me, love me so much that I carried his credit card, wore his jewelry, and had lunch with him until I satisfied him in every way. Then he returned to his blond American wife and two blond American children while I folded myself into the boxes that once bulged with sparkling promises, waiting for the ache to leave, which it did eventually. (Halaby 28)

Soraya in this regard attempts to accentuate her self-actualization which seems challenging to be achieved in a diasporic context. She consequently ends up engaging in a total negligence of her Arab/Muslim values and cultural reservations. She endeavours to go within a revolutionary direction to experience what it means to be liberal and satisfied with your own autonomous decisions in life – a self-government. Soraya says: “I like to have fun, to enjoy myself and to feel good. I have always been that way. My mother tells me how wrong this is, like it is evil or something and my sister says the same thing. I think they are wrong because they don’t know what it is to be satisfied, and it scares them” (Halaby 30). By her words, Soraya demonstrates her aim to negotiate new social and cultural realities while being in the setting of the diaspora. She adopts a new cultural orientation which opens up new possibilities to understand her identity – an identity that oscillates between Arab and American belongings. Soraya, in this sense, introduces herself as being different to her relative Khadija .i.e. the former is a rebel and the latter is submissive, within the context of how both of them confront the conservative nature of their community and its traditional values.

What happens to Khadija and Soraya, as such, shows that the experiences of Arab women in the USA are heterogeneous and vary in relation to certain factors and circumstances. By such a juxtaposition in portraying both of her characters, Laila Halaby introduces interesting readings of Arab female bodies in the USA. The literary critic Carol Fadda-Conrey argues that, by their articulations of their characters, especially if in a positive sense through constructive portrayals and stereotypes, Arab American writers aim for “a transformative project of communal and individual self-representation, one that captures the complexity and heterogeneity of their communities” (2). However, Fadda-Conrey further argues that, such efforts by Arab American writers do not “conform to a didactic and proclamatory platform. Instead, they render it a valuable creative space for delineating shared and individual concerns regarding Arab-Americans’ myriad positions and outlooks in the US, their connections to original Arab homelands, and their negotiation of the complexities of citizenship and belonging in the US” (3). Laila Halaby, in this sense, delineates her concerns over the troubled positions of Arab/Muslim women in the USA – such as the case of Soraya and Khadija – given that their identities are trapped between the rubrics of cultural gendered codes and traditional conservative nature of their communities and the necessity to engage with new realities within the wider American society – this makes their process of self-actualization complex, and sometimes harmful .i.e. hybrid identity does not signify a belonging to two oppositional affiliations only but also a demonstration of a clash between conservatism as echoed by Arab traditions and liberalism as featured within US modernity. This space of betweenness/liminality, however, might also be regarded as a comfort zone in which individuals can better envision how to negotiate their multiple realities. According to Wael Salam and Othman Abualadas “hyphenated identities provide a space for Arab Americans to traverse multiple geographies and cultures, a space that disregards insular and singular definitions of assimilation and indentarianism” (55). The novel, notwithstanding, through the experiences of its female characters in the USA, particularly those of Soraya and Khadija as seen previously in this study, defies Wael Salam and Othman Abualadas’ argument in that spaces of betweenness do problematize the individual’s sense of identity, and this identity becomes anxiously constructed. *West of the Jordan*, in this sense, proves that “contemporary Arab-American literature is a primary site for envisioning and delineating transnational reconfigurations of citizenship and belonging by virtue of its ability to transform social discourse and to shape subjectivities through the imaginative yet deeply effective tools of narratives and storytelling” (Fadda-Conrey 177).

By the same token, the politics of judgementalism also appears in the setting of the diaspora. This is echoed through the question of virginity and its resultant repercussions. The notion of

virginity is positioned by Laila Halaby as a serious conundrum in the Arab context, as it appears repetitively in the narratives, with regard to its importance within the traditional ideological framework – such a notion has a heavy connotation in the diaspora as much as in homeland societies despite different cultural and political circumstances and conditions. For instance, Sarah Abboud et al explain that, within the context of diaspora, in Arab communities “heterosexuality and compulsory virginity before marriage are traditionally understood as ideal for ‘good’ Arab girl, a ‘good’ Arab family and, consequently, a ‘good’ Arab family” (1103). This might denote that Arab traditional/conservative culture is resilient, especially if the will to assimilate is declined by the Arab community in the USA, such as Khadija’s family. Soraya, for instance, is warned by her mother that people may judge her severely if she loses her virginity before marriage and that this would distort her reputation: “you are nothing without your virginity”, her mother says (Halaby 190). Soraya’s reputation is scrutinized as much as Khadija’s. Khadija’s father thinks that “his daughter’s reputation is the most important thing in the world” (Halaby 30). Such restrictions and constant reminders of traditional values push Soraya to the edge of mental and psychological breakdown. She knows that she is able to escape this by searching for new possibilities while being in the USA. She regards the USA as a geo-cultural escape. An example of such possibilities is Soraya engaging in an incestuous relationship with her uncle Haydar who, according to her, symbolises shelter and support towards an independent life: “we are in America now, so may be Haydar could give me freedom, could get me to life I can control” (Halaby 190).

Through Soraya’s words, we can understand that the setting she is in enables her to celebrate her sexuality and liberate herself from what she regards as an outdated traditional cultural burden. Her incestuous relationship with Haydar, and her spending time with the married man that she met at the bar evidence this. She creates for herself a particular space in which other options are available to her to negotiate her identity as she wishes, as well as breaking out of her conservative culture, at least partially. It is worth pointing out that location and geo-cultural space matter in such personal experiences. Mawal, Soraya’s cousin, is in the village of Nawara, and she cannot celebrate her sexuality as Soraya does because she does not have as many options/possibilities as Soraya has. The former expresses her thoughts to be mischievous, sexually:

I want to stare at Miss Maryam’s large pointed breasts, to stand this much closer to the vegetable man who winks, to let him touch my hand when he give me back my change [...] I want to sit in the garden and hike my dress up to my knees so my legs can feel the sun as it kisses them. (Halaby 19)

Mawal is compelled to follow the conservative nature of her community in the village of Nawara in terms of behaviour and attitude and she is thus raised to be as such, especially by female elders such as her grandmother who Mawal describes as “conservative like a girdle” (Halaby 20). Khadija and Soraya, as Arab American female figures, are introduced by Laila Halaby as a good example of how Arab women in the USA negotiate their lives in relation to gender discourse and sexuality, in addition to other concerns whether related to race, politics, or religion. This positions them in multiple anxious places in which they not only search for a proper definition of their identities but also try to control their lives by reconsidering their attachment to traditional and conservative Arab cultural values. In this context Sarah Abboud et al claim that “being part of the visibility and invisibility of the Arab Americans, Arab American women’s lives are also framed by their immigration experiences as well as by race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, religion, and politics” (717). Laila Halaby, thus, not only positions herself as a prominent Arab American novelist, but also uses her fiction to advocate for Arab women who confront oppressing situations and to shine a light on their concerns and preoccupations. In my interview with her, I ask her if she has a particular stance to voice and echo the problems of Arab women through her female characters to which she replied: “I suppose. I think I feel that way towards any of my characters. May be I gravitate more towards female characters because I am a woman” (Berrebah, 4).

CONCLUSION

Throughout *West of the Jordan* we can understand that cultural insularity differs from one female character to another on the basis of various circumstances and conditions. The

anxious spaces that these characters occupy are experienced and negotiated in relation to the characteristics of the geo-cultural location that they live in, either the homeland as represented by the village of Nawara or the diaspora such as the case of Arabs in the USA. The novel suggests to us that cultural traditional ideologies and social mechanisms such as conservatism and judgementalism are a key factor in determining the construction of women characters' identity in narratives. As such, Laila Halaby, an author of Arab Palestinian origin, complicates the multiple readings of Arab female bodies as they are forged in the narratives, both in the USA and Palestine – two oppositional socio-cultural hemispheres. Shining a light on the politics of Arab women's experiences, and their struggle for affirmation in their communities, can be understood as a demonstration of Halaby's feminist critique. Halaby gives voice to each of her female characters in the novel, introducing multiple positions. It is possible, in this regard, to borrow Mariam Cooke's expression of 'speaking positions' to identify Halaby's feminist vision. This term reflects the multiplicity of positions that women occupy to echo their concerns and voice their issues. Mariam Cooke purports that these speaking positions are mainly based on a multiple critique "which provides women with the basis for power in Muslim communities. It enables them to emerge into representation from the margins" (xxvii). Indeed, in her reply to my question of whether or not she considers herself a feminist, Laila Halaby claims that feminism is present in her writings, and that she indeed considers herself an Arab American feminist: "If by feminist you mean supporting the rights of women based on the assumption of equality, then yes, absolutely!" (Berrebbah, 4). Interestingly, such feminist critique by Laila Halaby, I argue, is endorsed by her attempts to trigger empathetic engagement with her female characters' experiences. She tends to immerse the reader in her female characters' experiences, especially if a particular identification is possible.⁶ In an interview she says: "If you empathize with my women characters there is an element of feminism within you" (Berrebbah, 4). Samia Serageldin and Lisa Suhair Majaj, for instance, assert the importance of empathy in Arab American women's fiction. The former, in her article "Reflections and Refractions: Arab American Women Writing and Written" (2003), claims that "the novel or memoir creates a uniquely expansive, accessible space for empathy on the part of the reader in a way that less expansive genres cannot" (189). The later, referring to Arab American authors, says: "we need to write texts – especially novels – that will translate political realities into human terms, and that will create a space for empathy on the part of readers who might otherwise remain indifferent" (76). However, Arab American women authors with a feminist agenda, such as Laila Halaby, borrowing Susan Muaddi Darraj's words, "are in the precarious position of having to critique their culture while making sure not to fall into a politically charged stereotype" (248). In other words, within the context of this argument, empathy should be triggered by the portrayal of Arab women in their societies while carefully avoiding the possibility that a reader might embrace the existing misrepresentations of Arab women as a marker of oppression, exoticism, and submission.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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⁶ I would like to point out, in this context, that in my interview with Rajia Hassib, an Arab American novelist, she explains that responses to her fiction come mostly from young Muslim women readers from different parts of the world because the latter strongly identify with her characters .i.e. female characters particularly.

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