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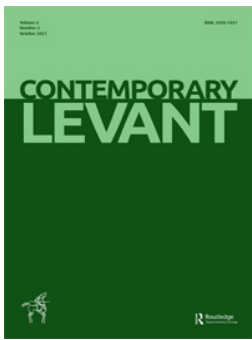
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## Troubled constructions of patriarchal and masculine identities in Laila Halaby's *West of the Jordan* (2003): a gendered perspective

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## Troubled constructions of patriarchal and masculine identities in Laila Halaby's *West of the Jordan* (2003): a gendered perspective

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### ABSTRACT

This article introduces the complex and troubled constructions of Arab masculine and patriarchal identities depicted in Laila Halaby's *West of the Jordan*, as told from the gaze of the novel's female protagonists. It suggests that the politics of Arab male characters' gender identity entail convoluted understandings, projecting them in both the diaspora and the homeland. The analysis in this article put flesh on the bones of some central questions regarding what problematises and affects masculinity and patriarchy in an Arab context. In addition to analytical and critical approaches to the novel, this article relies on a socio-cultural constructionist approach based on the perspectives of critics and theorists such as Raewyn Connell, Fadia Faqir, Fatima Mernissi and Homi Bhabha.

### KEYWORDS

Laila Halaby; masculinity; patriarchy; fatherhood; gender identity; Arab men

'How cruel the world can be' – Halaby (2003, p. 110)

Laila Halaby's *West of the Jordan* is one of the growing number of novels by and about Arab American women, portraying the Arab community inside and outside the USA. The title of this novel, as the Arab American literary critic Steven Salaita points out, 'denotes both geography and political orientation' (2011, p. 79). Salaita's statement suggests that Laila Halaby's novel holds transnational narratives that are characterised by the politics of belonging which concern characters who live between Palestine, Jordan and the USA.

*West of the Jordan* tells the story of four adolescent Arab female cousins of Palestinian origin. 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 small, traditional Palestinian village called Nawara. They live in difficult circumstances and go through distressing experiences due to cultural, political, social and economic events in their lives. Halaby's novel provides a space to discuss and scrutinise ambivalent and complex constructions of patriarchal and masculine identities in different cultural settings through multiple narratives as told by the female protagonists – a gendered narration, which means that patriarchal and masculine constructions are introduced from the point of view of the four female cousins.

This questioning of patriarchal and masculine identities is also triggered by another important female character – Aunt Farah. Her views in the narratives help to scrutinise these identities, especially in the setting of the homeland, Palestine. Employing exclusively female narrators can be regarded as, and suggestive of, Halaby's willingness to reinforce the role of women in contemporary narratives. In this article I aim to introduce an understanding of the construction process of patriarchal and masculine identities, and also fatherhood, as they play out in the homeland –

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the village of Nawara – and the US diaspora. This article projects multiple but constructive theoretical and conceptual frameworks that stem from criticism in aspects related to feminism, sociology, religion, psychology and gender discourse. This will help to broaden the horizons of our understandings of patriarchal and masculine identities in the Arab and Arab American contexts, and to provide effective and in-depth analysis of the male characters in *West of the Jordan*.

Masculinity and patriarchy are two intersecting concepts, providing multiple angles through which to understand men and study their gender identities. Jeff Hearn, for instance, points out that ‘critical studies on men have involved searches for the center of men and men’s power – in biology, the self, identity, “masculinity”/“masculinities,” subcultures, institutions, nation-state, social system, culture, capital, community, even fatherhood’ (2004, p. 247). Such critical studies of men and their gender identity have evolved through contemporary research agendas. As Connell *et al.* inform us, ‘in recent decades, the study of gender has expanded rapidly and with it, studies of gender issues about men and masculinities’ (Connell *et al.* 2005, p. 1). It is noteworthy, however, that gender issues regarding men, constructions of masculinity and the poetics of patriarchy have been placed under a critical lens through various discourses that ascribe to them complex definitions: this includes the racial (Uelbe 1997), the ethnic (Swami 2016), the national (Andersen and Wendt 2015), the cultural (Connell *et al.* 2005), the socio-political (Connell *et al.* 2005), the postcolonial (Newell 2009), and the religious (Moghadam 2011). This article aims to demonstrate how patriarchal and masculine identities of Arab male characters in *West of the Jordan* intersect with these discourses, ascribing to them contemporary critical understandings and showcasing how Arab masculinity operates in both socio-cultural realms: the USA and Palestine.

Contemporary Arab masculinity, borrowing Inhorn and Isidoros’ terms, ‘foreground new forms of male agency, as well as the emotional and moral worlds of Arab men living within larger familial, community, and national structures’ (2018, p. 319). According to Samira Aghacy, moreover, ‘there is no archetypal Arab man, but rather men in diverse socioeconomic and cultural configurations’ (2009, p. 3). This means that Arab men’s identities, whether masculine or patriarchal or otherwise, are dynamic and determined by their surroundings and environment as well as social norms, conventions and political ideologies. In this context, shining a light on such identities in Palestine and the USA through the narratives in *West of the Jordan* may clarify much of Aghacy’s argument.

It is worth pointing out that although patriarchy and masculinity are correlative and exist in a complementary relationship they have quite different characteristics and identifications. The former signifies a socio-political domination by men. It represents a gendered structure of society based on male power. Patriarchy, as Preeti Rawat suggests, ‘imposes masculinity and femininity character stereotypes in society which strengthen the iniquitous power relations between men and women’ (2014, p. 43). Masculinity, however, relies on the performance and behaviour of men in particular social-cultural and emotional contexts. It differs from one culture to another in accordance to certain expectations. It is not fixed but dynamic and has multiple configurations of gender identity (Connell 1995). Masculinity ‘emerges as a psychic and social identity’ (Cerchiaro 2020, p. 3). In this context, it should be acknowledged that the notion of masculinity is very complex and has multiple formations. As Inhorn argues, ‘because there are different ways of being a man, masculinities are differently valued’ (2012, p. 43). In a similar way, Connell and Messerschmidt regard masculinities as a set of ‘configurations of practice that are constructed, unfold, and changed through time’ (2005, p. 352).

It is also worth noting that the type of masculinity that is often performed by men in the Arab world – particularly the Middle East – is hegemonic masculinity (Inhorn 2012). Building her arguments on Marxist sociology, feminist theory and Gramsci’s notion of hegemony, Connell defines hegemonic masculinity as ‘the strategy for being a man that legitimizes patriarchy in current, local practices of gender. In this formulation, masculinity is shaped by, but not necessarily an incarnation of, cultural ideals of manliness’ (2005, pp. 76–77). This means that patriarchy is dependent on masculinity. This particular type of masculinity ‘often concentrates ideal masculine attributes,

including wealth and command of other resources, attractiveness, virility (i.e., sexual potency), physical strength, heterosexuality, and emotional detachment' (Inhorn 2012, p. 43). Mike Donaldson, in his critical article 'What is Hegemonic Masculinity?' defines this masculinity as a

culturally idealized form, it is both a personal and collective project, and is the common sense about breadwinning and manhood. It is exclusive, anxiety-provoking, internally and hierarchically differentiated, brutal, and violent. It is pseudo-natural, tough, contradictory, crisis-prone, rich, and socially sustained. (1993, p. 4)

By the same token, Connell and Messerschmidt suggest that 'hegemonic masculinities are likely to involve specific patterns of internal division and emotional conflict, precisely because of their association with gendered power' (2005, p. 532). This definition of hegemonic masculinity by Connell and Messerschmidt is well demonstrated through the Arab male characters in *West of the Jordan*, particularly Haydar and Khadija's father.

### Aunt Farah

The troubled constructions of Arab men's gender identity in *West of the Jordan* appear both explicitly and implicitly in the narratives through different scenes and characters. Aunt Farah, Mawal's relative, exposes the complex construction of Arab masculinity and patriarchal identities in the village of Nawara, Palestine, in relation to traditional socio-cultural terms such as virginity, reputation, honour, shame and forced marriage. These concepts have a catalytic impact on the formation of traditional Arab culture – especially if it is conservative – in terms of the way men are regarded by society or even by themselves. The Arab notion of masculinity, as Wissam Abdul-Jabbar points out, is closely related to a culture of bravery and shame (2017, p. 745).

As Mawal narrates, Aunt Farah comments critically on an Arab Palestinian expatriate who abandons his family in Puerto Rico and comes back to his village to settle and look for a new, virgin wife: 'and you came home and married a virgin in the name of God, Farah thought to herself' (2003, p. 52). For Aunt Farah, the expatriate man reminds her of her first husband 'who wanted to go between the legs of a young virgin, to feel control after all those years of foreign prostitutes and cheap women' (2003, p. 52). She, by her reflections, shines a light on the commonality between her first husband and the expatriate – the necessity to marry a virgin, given that, as Nadine Naber contends, virginity is one of the key demands 'of an idealized Arab womanhood' (2006, p. 93). Such a necessity, particularly in conservative and traditional Arab cultures, is fundamental to completing a man's masculinity and actualises his patriarchal identity amongst kin communities, otherwise a man would be burdened by shame and disgrace. It is the men's responsibility to safeguard the family's honour which can be achieved 'when individuals protect themselves and their family from public humiliation and criticism' (Aboulhassan and Brumley 2019, p. 2).

As Fadia Faqir further argues, 'families associate their honour with the virginity of their unmarried daughters and with the chastity of the married ones' (2001, p. 69). A woman, in fact, can be subjected to violent treatment and extreme punishment in some Arab countries if it is proved that she has disrupted her family or husband's honour and reputation – this constitutes one facet of neo-patriarchy (Faqir 2001).<sup>1</sup> From this perspective, men associate their masculinity with the chastity and purity of their partners. In other words, drawing on the case of Farah's husband and the Palestinian expatriate, marrying a chaste and virgin woman masculinises the man and glorifies/champions his patriarchal esteem in society. In this regard, in the opinion of the Arab feminist critic Fatima Mernissi, 'the deflowered virgin becomes a lost woman, but the man, like the legendary phoenix, emerges from the fray purer, more virile, better respected' (Mernissi 1982, p. 186). Indeed, Mernissi further points to the intersectionality between masculinity, patriarchy and the virginity of the female partner: 'like honour, virginity is the manifestation of a purely male preoccupation in societies [...] The concepts of honour and virginity locate the prestige of a man between the legs of a woman' (1982, p. 183). Masculinity, from Faqir's perspective, 'is often praised and exonerated in neo-

patriarchal Arab societies. Popular culture is full of sayings, signals and proverbs, which glorify men, their masculinity and image' (2001, p. 71).

By the same token, it is possible to diagnose Aunt Farah's husband's masculinity as paradoxical. This is because his conceptualisation of virginity holds contradictory and complex understandings of it, projecting some kind of irrationality of both patriarchal and masculine mentalities. To further explain this type of masculinity, I would like to focus on the following statement by Fatima Mernissi:

The picture of a male virgin trembling with purity and innocence on the eve of his wedding is, for the Arab man, the height of absurdity. This, however, is what he wishes to impose on the Arab woman. That is the great tragedy of the patriarchal male: his status lies in irrational schizophrenic contradictions [...] If men really respect virginity, all they have to do is to set it up as exemplary pre-marital conduct as important for men as it is for women. (1982, pp. 1985–1986)

Mernissi links masculinity to schizophrenia because of the male's psychological understanding of gendered virginity, especially in the traditional Arab context. This understanding demonstrates conflicting points of view concerning which of the partners should be blamed for losing virginity. This means that the question of virginity shows the extent to which men are in control of gender relations and are also privileged over women. This also shows the narcissistic male mentality.

The exposure of troubled patriarchal and masculine dynamics in the village of Nawara by Aunt Farah does not stop at this level. Mawal, the narrator, describes how Aunt Farah recalls how, at sixteen years old, she was forced to marry an old man who gave her '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, p. 51). Regardless of the violent patriarchal actions of Farah's husband, the quotation also signals that the father figure in this society has absolute control over the arrangement of marriages and the dissolution of them, placing women, figuratively speaking, between the hammer and the anvil. In other words, women in this case confront the patriarchies of their fathers and husbands, making their situation more critical. Aunt Farah's memory, moreover, pinpoints two realities that are often condemned in a feminist context: forced marriage and domestic violence.

Both forced marriage and domestic violence are signifiers of the patriarchal structure of society. Given that the social system in Palestinian is, to a great extent, traditional and conservative, such practices are commonly active, prevalent and perpetuated (Haj-Yahya *et al.* 2012, Haj-Yahia 2000; 2002).<sup>2</sup> In fact, domestic violence, including beatings, is understood to be a complementary component to masculinity and man's authority. In this context, Julie Peteet opines that 'while beatings reproduce masculine identity, they also reproduce men's authority and physical domination in the family' (1994, p. 45).

In the same line, Aunt Farah's reflection on her bitter experience with her husband denotes what the cultural critic Deniz Kandiyoti terms 'bargaining with patriarchy'. For Kandiyoti this term means the mechanism of women's endeavours to strategise, within a set of concrete constraints, life options to passively or actively confront oppression (1988). This critic distinguishes two contrasted systems of male dominance: 'the sub-Saharan African pattern, in which the insecurities of polygyny are matched with areas of relative autonomy for women, and classic patriarchy, which is characteristic of South Asia as well as the Muslim Middle East' (1988, p. 274). The latter system intersects with Aunt Farah's experiences because of the nature of her society's structure: traditional and conservative. Aunt Farah, following Kandiyoti's opinion, seems to 'passively' resist the patriarchal oppression of her husband when 'she ignored and covered her welts' and kept herself silent, as her memory reveals. Her mechanism of negotiating her husband's oppressive patriarchal treatment in this way is to avoid the possibility of divorce and is also a type of hopeless attempt to cope with the patriarchal structure of her society that views divorced women with critical and judgmental perceptions. In other words, her choice to bargain with patriarchy in this manner stems from, to use Ennaj and Sadiqi's words, 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' (2011, p. 5) and also because, as Muhammad Haj-Yahia argues, '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' (2002, p. 740).

In addition, the role of Aunt Farah in exposing patriarchal realities positions her as an important key character utilised by Laila Halaby in the agenda of constructing and modulating masculine and patriarchal identities in *West of the Jordan*. As such, Aunt Farah further reveals another facet of her husband's patriarchy – a religion-based one. This is apparent through her description of her husband as pretending piety, to the extent that he 'would speak with God's words spattered on top of his own and people thought him virtuous, so virtuous he beat his own baby out of her and then beat her more and told her she was careless for letting a child die inside her very own body' (2003, pp. 52–53). Zahia Salhi (2013), Valentine Moghadam (2011), Asma Barlas (2002), Fatima Mernissi (2011), and Ziba Mir-Hosseini (2013) put forward the argument that patriarchy in Arab countries, particularly the Middle East, functions systematically in relation to religion – Islam – which is used to discipline and control women.<sup>3</sup> This ascribes to Aunt Farah's husband a troubled representation of Muslim masculine identity.<sup>4</sup>

## The fathers

Equally important, the perpetuation of patriarchy also appears through another character – Abu-Jalal, Hala's father. Hala, after her arrival in Jordan – specifically a village near the border with Palestine in the country's west – to attend the funeral of her mother who died of cancer, reveals the patriarchal stance of her father shortly after her reunion with family: 'but not even two days into my mourning her death, he made it clear that he was going to be the one to make the decisions about my life from then on' (2003, p. 45). Hala, by deciphering her father's words, realises that she is expected to marry and build a family and settle in her homeland, Jordan. Her situation can be regarded as an example of Aboulhassan and Brumley's argument 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' (2019, p. 2). Abu-Jalal uses his authority as a father to determine his daughter's future. It is a reflection of his hegemonic masculinity that tends to secure male dominance either inside or outside domestic spheres and to control familial and social policies.

Through the complex and troubled constructions of masculinity and patriarchy as revealed in the above analytical readings, Laila Halaby opens up the possibility of questioning Marcia Inhorn's conceptualisation of modern Arab masculinities that constitute what the latter calls *New Arab Men*. Inhorn refers to this type of men as positively dynamic. She says:

*New Arab men* are rejecting the assumptions of their Arab forefathers, including what I call the *four notorious Ps* – patriarchy, patrilineality, patrilocality, and polygyny [...] emergent masculinities in the Middle East are characterized by resistance to patriarchy, patrilineality, and patrilocality, which are being undermined'. (2012, p. 302)

Laila Halaby projects and reinforces the idea that Arab patriarchal masculinities, in their ugliest forms, are still perpetuated and active in the Middle East, drawing on Palestine and Jordan as examples. It is true that Inhorn's argument was established nearly a decade after the publication of *West of the Jordan*, but very recent scholarship and research agendas suggest that patriarchy is still heavily entrenched in Arab society, especially in the Middle East, in different forms, including institutionally. Fariba Solati (2017) and Zahia Salhi (2013) point out that Arab socio-cultural structures in North African and Middle Eastern countries are fundamentally characterised by patriarchal tendencies and policies, with the result that Arab women's lives become difficult to negotiate in many areas of society: in educational institutions, at work, and in public spaces. Moha Ennaji and Fatima Sadiqi, for instance, conclude from their research on gender-based violence in the Middle East that 'women are the most frequent victims of violence in the region, including wide spread domestic violence, sexual harassment, rape, and human trafficking. However, women



rarely approach the authorities for assistance, because the latter are often biased against women' (2011, p. 5).

The troubled construction of Arab patriarchal and masculine identities also appears in another setting – across the Atlantic in the USA. Laila Halaby introduces us to such identities through the gaze of her female characters – Khadija and Soraya – who struggle to negotiate their hybrid identities which oscillate between Arab and American cultural belonging. Khadija, for instance, provides a narration about her father who seems to be positioned to have the same drastic patriarchal influence and masculine behaviour as Aunt Farah's husband. As Khadija narrates: 'scary is when the yelling doesn't stop and when everyone has bruises 'from the devil,' as my mother says. I know better. I know they come because the sand sends him inside that small bottle of liquor he keeps locked in his toolbox and turns his insides into fire' (2003, p. 174). The link drawn here between Khadija's father and Aunt Farah's husband symbolises a commonality that revolves around the poetics of patriarchy. This, relevantly, mirrors Jeff Hearn's statement:

Men's power in patriarchy and patriarchal social arenas is maintained in part through men's commonalities with each other. Men are bound together, though not necessarily consciously, by dominant sexuality, violence and potential violence, social and economic privilege, the power of the father, and political power more generally. (2004, p. 249)

Such commonality, moreover, falls within Salam Abulhassan and Krista M. Brumley's claim that 'Arab American women's experiences are uniquely based on patriarchy as it exists in the Arab world' (2019, p. 2). Khadija's father thus symbolises the continuation of Arab traditional patriarchy in the USA, projecting a complex understanding of how Arab immigrant men negotiate their masculine and patriarchal identities in a multicultural setting that celebrates various feminist discourses. Furthermore, it is possible to analyse Khadija's father's masculinity as being hegemonic, implementing an attitude to forcibly impose patriarchal authority on his family, projecting a commonality with Hala's father too. Such hegemonic masculinity seems unstable, situational, and characterised by a lack of emotional control. Todd Reeser, for instance, argues that 'hegemonic masculinity is always in movement. Always. It's never a stable thing' (2017, p. 199).

Indeed, Khadija projects in her narration how her father's mood and attitude in the domestic sphere oscillate between being a source of affection and a source of threat devoid of emotions, generating a view of his fatherhood as a reflection of unstable forms of patriarchal masculinity. She says:

sometimes my father loves my mother –and the rest of us– so much that he becomes a kissing and hugging machine. Sometimes, though, he is an angry machine that sees suspicious moves in every breath. But most of the time he is sad, his thoughts somewhere I cannot visit'. (2003, p. 37)

Khadija's father in this instance is consigned to contradiction in terms of how he practices his fatherhood, providing a definition of it as unstable and dynamic. This can, to some extent, extend Jeff Hearn's view towards the nature of fatherhood in a globalised world. He claims that 'social realities, such as fatherhood, may be characterized as social centres of dominance, yet should not be seen a priori as solid, unified or singular; more usually, they are multiple, dispersed and sites of contradictions' (2004, p. 245). It is possible therefore, in this context, to suggest that Khadija's father projects a hybrid fatherhood. I argue that he demonstrates both constructive fatherhood and destructive fatherhood upon situational mood.<sup>5</sup>

It is necessary here, furthermore, to draw attention to the psychological state of Khadija's father and the reasons behind his sadness, and unstable/situational attitudes. In other words, his patriarchal psyche is anxious in a way that it becomes unpredictable. This troubled patriarchal psyche can be deconstructed as the outcome of external factors – mainly socio-cultural – that may have an impact on his character as a father and trigger him to react accordingly. Importantly, Khadija's father blames himself for not achieving the American dream he harboured prior to his arrival in the USA. His plans to become financially comfortable fail and drag him into a state of self-destruction. Khadija tells us how her father bitterly reflects on his condition in the USA, narrating that: 'That



evening my father started talking about the sand that filled his dreams again. How could you not be a little crazy when you have watched your dreams be buried the way I have? he asked' (2003, p. 192). He regards himself as a father who does not deserve to be a carer and provider for his family because he fails to accomplish two prominent but debatable constructions of fatherhood in contemporary societies. These, according to Isabella Crespi and Elisabetta Ruspini, are '(1) discourses which state that fathers are to take care of financial providing (as breadwinners), and (2) over the last decades, discourses that describe highly involved and caring fathers' (2015, p. 354). Indeed, David Morgan confirms that 'the idea of the provider is a major element in the construction of masculine identity' (2005, p. 169).

This thought of being a failure adds an extra burden that weakens his personality as a father and diminishes his responsibility towards domestic affairs. In addition, Khadija's father's words, in the above quote from the novel, establish a connection to both nature and materialism; these two components can be interpreted as an explicit reference to the construction of his troubled masculinity and manhood. In terms of nature, the sand refers to the desert and this in turn, taking into consideration the origin of Khadija's father – as a Palestinian – refers to the Middle East. It is quite absurd to some extent that Khadija's father, even though lamenting himself, indirectly refers to the natural world of his homeland. By this, he reflects on his Arab masculine identity. In this context, Ruben Cenamor draws attention to this symbolic relationship between nature and masculinity when he says: 'In narratives where there is a close connection between the natural world and male characters, nature usually reinvigorates manliness, and favors traditional models of masculinity' (2017, p. 199). Cenamor's claim comes within a conversation with Stefan Brandt who examines the relationship between masculinity and nature in the Western genre, with a particular focus on Native Americans in the USA. The problem in the case of Khadija's father, however, is that the natural world that reinvigorates his manliness and masculinity is absent. In other words, his masculinity has been disrupted by the loss of his attachment to his origins and homeland. Khadija's father, moreover, confirms this problematic condition by his statement throughout his daughter's narration: 'my ache comes from losing my home', my father tells us a lot' (2003, p. 39).

In terms of materialism, it is worth pointing out that the country of residence that Khadija's father settles in – the USA – is a capitalist country. This means that, in such a country, borrowing Penny Griffin's words, 'capitalists have a vested interest in paying their workers the lowest possible wage for their labour' (2017, p. 156). Being a mechanic, therefore, provides Khadija's father with a low wage and causes him to lead an unsuccessful material life. In his review of the novel, Steven Salaita describes Khadija's father as the poorest male immigrant in the novel (2011, p. 83). In fact, he is destitute to the extent that Khadija's mother finds herself compelled to work in a care home for the elderly and take extra shifts to support her husband financially. Khadija's father's economic/financial situation and its impact on his attitude towards his family and parental responsibilities can be well illustrated through Haideh Moghissi's discussion of men in diaspora:

Economic hardship and the loss of friends and social status provoke a deep emotional vulnerability. Many men rely more on family members, particularly their spouses, who are themselves struggling to adjust to new conditions in their lives and thus are sometimes unable to provide the necessary moral and emotional support. This lack of support becomes a new source of tension, straining family relations. (2005, p. 256)

Khadija's father dream of being successful in the USA is, however, fulfilled by another Arab male character in the novel – Soraya's father. The latter is positioned in the narratives as well-respected and valued because of his wealth and success. As Soraya tells us:

My mother is the strong one in our house and people would probably make fun of my father if it weren't for all the money he has. Money is his favourite thing, like somewhere along the way he decided he could only focus on one thing and he thought better money than family, less headaches. So men respect him because of his success. (2003, p. 26)

As such, the images of both Soraya and Khadija's fathers are scrutinised in accordance with the level of their success and the extent to which they fulfil the American dream. The USA to them, in Steven

Salaita's words, is 'a set of mythologies, promises, and dreamscapes' (2011, p. 84). This also pinpoints that, reflected through Soraya and Khadija's fathers, diasporic experiences and circumstances are catalysts in determining the psychodynamics of masculine and patriarchal identities.

By the same token, it is possible to decipher an explicit juxtaposition and contradiction between Khadija and Soraya's parents. On the one hand, Khadija's mother is repressed and a victim of severe patriarchy and her father is financially troubled and socially distant. On the other hand, Soraya's mother is active, liberal and a strong figure in the domestic sphere and her father, as explained before, is wealthy and well established in the community. Soraya's family, nonetheless, is more Americanised, assimilated and, mostly, adapted to wider society in the USA than Khadija's family – the latter is traditional and culturally introvert. This might reflect Laila Halaby's definition of herself as stated in her short biography: 'In life and in stories I love contrasts and unlikely juxtapositions, which perhaps is the result of coming from two distinct cultures'.<sup>6</sup> Halaby not only shows how two Arab American families negotiate their lives in the USA, but also unveils some of the complexities that surround the construction of fatherhood and masculinity in the diaspora.

Returning to Khadija's father, changing and frustrated socio-cultural expectations have a profound impact on his fathering and the way his involvement in the care of his children and family is established. This complicates his sense of identity as a father. Crespi and Ruspini, for instance, comment on the role of socio-cultural structures and familial inconveniences that defy the process of fathering and their impact on fathers' identities. They note that

fathering in contemporary society requires men to be simultaneously provider, guide, household help and nurturer. The difficulties of these roles, and the tensions they sometimes produce, challenge men's relationships with their female partners, the meaning and place of work in their lives and their sense of self as competent adults. (2015, p. 353)

Indeed, the troubled situation of Khadija's father prevents him from acting as a provider, nurturer and, in particular, a man qualified to look after his family. This places him in two contrasting positions: on the one hand he can be regarded as a victim who is burdened by the heavy responsibilities this societal structure places on men and the patriarchal ideologies that he tries to negotiate i.e. Arab and American. The novel, through its narratives, represents him as hopeless and impotent. On the other hand, the resultant conditions introduce him as a villain. This occurs through his repressive patriarchal treatment of his wife and daughter, Khadija, who recounts how her father hits his baby – Khadija's youngest brother – and his own father because he comes home drunk (2003, p. 207). He demonstrates his virility through domestic violence. In fact, such patriarchal treatment and misfathering reach a detrimental level when Khadija's father forces his daughter to drink liquor and abuses her physically:

I'll tell you what the scariest thing is: When he drinks. He doesn't do it that often and he doesn't have to drink that much before his eyes becomes bullets, his fists the curled hands of a boxer, and our living room the ring of *Monday Night Wrestling* [...] One time I went into the yard to look for a ball I had lost in the bushes the day before, and I found my father drinking. He grabbed my arm and held his bottle in front of me. 'Drink'. he said [...] he pulled me by the arm and then by the ear and dragged me into the kitchen where my mother was cutting vegetables. 'Oh mother of Shit', he called to her. 'Your little dog of a daughter has been drinking. Smell her mouth'. (2003, p. 38)

This scene provides a clear picture of the calamities caused by Khadija's father's troubled sense of fatherhood and the intense patriarchal attitude he has consigned himself to. On the one hand, the scene validates Barbara Hobson and David Morgan's opinion that in some cases 'men father but do not necessarily assume the responsibilities of fatherhood' (2004, p. 1). On the other hand, it sets itself as an example for Aboulhassan and Brumley's argument that Arab women in the USA experience the harmful effects of patriarchy and bitterly negotiate their lives in accordance with a cultural and traditional patriarchal system (2019). Indeed, Khadija emphasises the second point when she states: 'My father is a traditional man, my mother says. That's why he is so strict' (2003, p. 149). Khadija's father's traditional ideology appears to constitute his manliness and gender identity.

## Diaspora masculinities

Expressing traditional ideology in a diasporic setting, such as the case of Khadija's father, complicates the construction of male gender identity and introduces it as ambivalent. The state of being an immigrant and displaced in a foreign land, as Mike Donaldson *et al.* contend (2009), has a profound impact on men's behaviour and attitude to family relations and gender roles. The status of Khadija's father can further be understood by his struggle to properly perform/maintain his hegemonic masculinity which is, as Donaldson argues, 'the common sense about breadwinning and manhood' (1993, p. 4). Khadija's father is aware that, in Arab society and culture, and even from a Muslim religious perspective, breadwinning and taking care of family's financial needs are a significant aspect that shapes his manhood. As Donaldson and Richard Howson argue, 'migrating men do not arrive in their new homeland bereft of notions about their own manliness. To the contrary, they usually bring with them firm beliefs and well-established practices about manhood and gender relations' (2009, p. 210). However, being in the diaspora and experiencing the effects of migration – such as ethnic marginalisation and racial profiling – make it difficult for men to adhere to such a requirement. Equally important, the negative effects of diasporic mediations and the bitter experience of immigration is not restricted to Khadija's father's status only; it also appears through Haydar, Soraya's uncle, also of Palestinian origin, who similarly migrated to the USA for a better life.<sup>7</sup>

What happens to Haydar is similar to Khadija's father: he is troubled by melancholic memories, the absence of a proper home and the inability to build a successful life in the USA. Haydar immerses himself in gambling, drugs, promiscuity and alcohol. The narrator, Soraya, tells us that he was respected in his village, Nawara, in which 'he was the fastest runner' (2003, p. 212) and was beloved because of his handsomeness and the good reputation of his family. Haydar, however, escapes his village to free himself of the tragedies he witnessed when he was a boy, mainly the cruel killing of his father. Soraya describes him 'like a dead bird in a shit-filled fountain' (2003, p. 175).

The novel depicts drastic changes in Haydar's character and fortune. Shortly after his arrival in the USA, rumours start to surface about him. People who know him realise that 'something is not right – and indeed very wrong – with this young man' (2003, p. 212). Indeed, 'there was the time – in Los Angeles – when he went to his sister's house for dinner during Ramadan and his nine-year-old niece walked into the unlocked bathroom where he was jabbing a needle into his leathery skin' (2003, p. 213). This troubled portrayal of Haydar, I argue, is the outcome of his vulnerable masculinity and the inability to cope with the dominant culture, regardless of his crisis of belonging and longing for home. This obscures his sense of self-worth. In other words, the masculinity that was championed in his homeland – the village of Nawara – has now been affected by the ravages of diasporic experience. In this context, Heideh Moghissi points out that displaced/migrating men, especially those of Muslim background,<sup>8</sup> might encounter a gender identity crisis when negotiating their diasporic experiences and encountering cultural challenges. She claims that 'gender as a differing factor in adjusting to relocation might be directly linked to the greater difficulty men have in re-establishing themselves in a new society in which every aspect of social life seems to conspire against their authority and sense of self-worth' (2005, p. 256).

In fact, Haydar's anxious experience and its impact on his masculinity might be similar to the male character Hanif Al Eyad in Wissam Abu-Jaber's novel *Crescent* (2003).<sup>9</sup> The latter, as Abdul-Jabbar explains, is stripped of his masculine ideals because being forcibly displaced in a foreign land 'exposes his internalized vulnerabilities to "unhomeliness"' (2017, p. 741). In other words, 'Hanif Al Eyad's loss of home triggers an internalized sense of failed masculinity' (2017, p. 741). Abdul-Jabbar assesses Hanif's gender identity – a fragmented masculinity – through the concept of *unheimlich* which was first introduced by Sigmund Freud in 1919 and means 'the uncanny' – the feeling of experiencing strangeness and familiarity at the same time, generating an internal disruption to understand one's own identity, especially in a diasporic context, which can also mean, in this sense, 'the unhomely'. Heidi Schlipphacke, on the one hand, explains that the notion of the uncanny – or in the German term *das unheimlich* – is an outcome of emotional anxiety and

trauma (2015). Homi Bhabha, on the other hand, interprets the concept from a postcolonial perspective. In an essay titled 'The World and the Home' he refers to 'the unhomely' as an awkward word that 'captures something of the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world in unhallowed space' (1992, p. 141). In his analysis of literary fictions, particularly that of Toni Morrison and Isabel Archer, Bhabha writes: 'Although the 'unhomely' is paradigmatic post-colonial experience, it has a resonance that can be heard distinctly, if erratically, in fictions that negotiate the powers of cultural difference in a range of historical conditions and social contradictions' (1992, p. 142). In other words, he adds, in the process of displacement and migration 'the borders between home and the world becomes confused; and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting' (1992, p. 141). Following Bhabha and Schlipphacke's claims, it is possible in this regard to argue that both Haydar and Hanif's realisation of their gender identity and cultural belonging is trapped by cultural ambivalences and the anxiety of experiencing the uncanny (the unhomely) in the host country, the USA. Their construction of masculinity as it existed in their homeland is now troubled, vulnerable and ambivalent in that it entails a divided and disorienting vision, whether culturally or socio-politically.<sup>10</sup>

Haydar's vulnerable masculinity, furthermore, is characterised by trauma. Soraya, the narrator, tells us through her portrayal of her uncle how people see that he lived a tragic life and 'his ability to sleep for twenty-four hours as general fatigue' and also the fact that 'he sleeps with a knife in his hand. Even when he is not alone' (2003, p. 213). This posits a possibility that Haydar experiences a psychological turmoil and internalised conflict which lead to insecurities which, consequently, construct his masculinity as vulnerable. In fact, Hamdi, a male relative of Soraya, provides a statement that can well describe the reality of Haydar as being psychologically ill due to traumatic experiences and loss of inner self:

Your uncle is like other men you see, except this one lies on his back in the middle of a city park and talks to pigeons and imitates statues. Clinically speaking he is bipolar, paranoid schizophrenic, but for real life he is crazy. Not one hundred percent crazy, but walking toward it at a rapid pace, catalysed by God knows what monster inside him. We try to help, but there is not much we can do – there is not much anyone can do. I think you needed to see him now, while you can recognize him. (2003, p. 214)

Indeed, Colm Walsh (2020) points out that trauma negatively affects the male's behaviour and the way he conceptualises his masculine identity, especially in young men. Hamdi's statement can engage another facet that characterises the lives of immigrants in the diaspora – a psychological one, regardless of other aspects whether socio-political, cultural, or religious.

Troubled psychology and mental instability are often linked to trauma. Diaspora, in Ananya Jahanara Kabir's opinion, 'is frequently experienced, remembered, and analysed in terms of trauma' (2019, p. 72). In the case of Haydar, the traumatic experiences happened in his homeland – such as witnessing the violent killing of his father – but their ramifications and repercussions occur in the USA, the setting of the diaspora. In this sense, it is possible to note that Haydar's troubled psychology and mental instability in the diaspora is a reflection of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Such disorder reaches a detrimental level when one engages the feeling of homelessness and the crisis of belonging, projecting an internal vacuum. Sigmund Freud, for instance, associates trauma with the feeling of loss. He denotes two types of loss: 'the loss of a beloved one, or the loss of some abstraction that has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, or so on' (qtd. in Boutler 2011, p. 5). Haydar's traumatic situation, in this regard, can be justified by his experiencing of both types of loss i.e. the death of his father (the beloved) and the disconnection from his original country, Palestine.

Equally important, the troubled conditions of male characters in the diaspora, in addition to Haydar, appear through Walid. This time, however, such conditions are not characterised by trauma but by racialisation. Soraya narrates that she and Walid decide to have a meeting at a bar called the Jack Knife. She tells us that 'it was the first time Walid had been there. White name, white customers, white neighborhood' (2003, p. 58). After a while a drunken white man

approaches Walid and aggressively tries to provoke and agitate him because Walid is a non-white American and does not 'belong' in this place. To the white American man, Walid looks like a Mexican due to his brown skin: 'Hey you fucking Mexicans. Chickenshit boy running from us? [...] Just remember, this ain't a Mexican joint. You go somewhere else to drink your *cervezas* and hang out with your *puta*' (2003, p. 58). The scene escalates rapidly and other white men join to beat Walid and punch his face, causing him to bleed. This scene not only shows how racial configurations impact the assimilation of Walid as an Arab man in the dominant US social stream but also represent him as a hyper-visible subject and a victim of hostility and estrangement as an outcome of the colonial fantasy that the white American man exposes. Indeed, in this context, it is noteworthy that there is an intersection between racial identity and the subjectivity of masculinity (Uelbe 1997, Tabar *et al.* 1999, Connell 2005).

Michael Uelbe further explains that 'by mapping identities in terms of colonial fantasy and the iconography of racial masculine identities, theoretical models emerge that are aimed at supplanting reductive accounts of identity formation at the intersection of race and masculinity' (1997, p. 7). It is possible, then, to theorise that Walid experiences a visible racialised masculinity that confirms his ethnic identity and non-belonging to the dominant social mainstream. The commonality between Walid and Haydar thus is the disconnection from home and its profound repercussions that entail external and internal effects. Such diasporic experiences show that, as Divya Tolia-Kelly notes, 'there are toxic economies at play, including loss of physical and mental health, vulnerability to exploitation, brutality and death' (2019, p. 2017).

## Conclusion

Laila Halaby, through her novel, complicates the essentialist envisioning of Arab patriarchal and masculine identities by providing multiple constructions of them. She validates Judith Gardiner's opinion that masculine identities are plural, in constant change, and fluid throughout time (2002, p. 11). In other words, she introduces us to various masculinities and patriarchies that are, borrowing Arat and Hasan's words, 'not stagnant but change through time and space, and that men are socialised or conditioned into acquiring different masculinities, including violent and aggressive ones, by varying social conditions' (2018, pp. 789–790). The critical analysis of Arab male characters' gender identity as manifested in *West of the Jordan*, moreover, suggests that patriarchy is inherited and transformed generationally; that is why it persists in two different cultural realms, despite global developments and feminist critiques – the resilience of patriarchy.

In addition, by providing descriptions of Arab men's patriarchy – the hegemonic and the aggressive – in her novel, Halaby does not reinforce the Orientalist stereotypes of Arab men or Arab culture as being patriarchal; rather she aims to expose the extent to which oppressive social and cultural circumstances and outdated traditional ideologies can intensify patriarchal practices that victimise women and interiorise their position in society. It is important, in this regard, to acknowledge that Halaby also provides a positive and delectable constructivist image of other male characters in the novel, such as Hamdi and Walid. The former provides constant advice to Soraya on how to manage her emotional confusion with regards to her relationship with Haydar. Hamdi is also supportive of Soraya's choice to liberate herself from outdated cultural traditions. The latter, as shown by the incident in the bar described above, is protective, caring about Soraya's safety when the white-American characters attack them. Such an image, furthermore, is apparent through Mawal, who tells us about her grandfather's wish to encourage women's education and their emancipation, particularly his daughter Huda:

My grandfather had land in Ramallah and was different from anyone else. He was open to new ideas. Against the advice of the entire village, he let her go to America and live with her brother while she studied. There is nothing wrong with letting a girl learn as much as a boy does,' he repeated to the many doubters. (2003, p. 20)

Tackling the bitter realities of patriarchy and troubled constructions of masculinity that affect women's lives in society, either in diaspora or homeland, as well as resisting Orientalist stereotypes about Arab men and Arab culture, can be regarded as an implicit feminist critique. As such, Laila Halaby can be identified as an example of the Arab American feminists 'who have long shouldered a double burden: not only do they work against sexism and patriarchy in their communities, but they also have to contend with the harmful stereotypes propagated about them and their Arab culture in the mass media' (Amireh 2011, p. 44).

## Notes

1. Fadia Faqir also states that 'a man's honour is closely related to the behaviour of his female relatives, not only in Muslim or Arab societies, but in Western societies' (2001, p. 69). In other words, 'the honour ethic as it applies to women's sexuality is not specific to Islam, but it exists in many other non-Muslim societies [...] such as Spain and Portugal' (Faqir 2001, p. 69). This means that the notion of honour is globally scrutinised.
2. It is noteworthy that Palestinian society can also exemplify other Arab societies, particularly of the Middle East, in terms of patriarchal structure. Fadia Faqir, for instance, argues that 'different types of abuse of the disadvantaged, including women, can be found in most Arab countries' (2001, p. 67).
3. This does not mean that Islam is patriarchal or it supports gender-based violence. It is, in fact, the repercussions of patriarchal readings and interpretations of the Quran and sacred texts from a male perspective to reinforce men's authority over Muslim women. This is probably one of the main reasons behind the formation of Islamic feminism – to re-appropriate the readings of sacred texts and narratives and constrain the patriarchal readings that directly or indirectly oppress women and confine their rights.
4. It is noteworthy, in this context, to differentiate between Islamic masculinity and Muslim masculinity. The former follows the guidance of what constitutes masculinity as implemented in sacred texts and narratives – Quran and Shari'a. The latter is consigned to and affected by the current surrounding circumstances and conditions, either cultural, socio-economic or political. For more insights into these different but interconnected types of masculinities, see: Arat and Hasan (2018).
5. For more on hybrid fatherhood, see Jennifer Randles' article Manning Up to be a Good Father: Hybrid Fatherhood, Masculinity, and U.S. Responsible Fatherhood Policy (2018).
6. See <https://lailahalaby.net> for further details. Accessed 10/09/2020.
7. For more insights into the politics of Arab men's identities in the diaspora in *West of the Jordan* please see my interview with Laila Halaby: Berrebbah and Halaby (2021).
8. Peter Morey and Amin Yaqin, in *Framing Muslims: Stereotyping and Representations since 9/11* (2011), explain that being Muslim has become a burden in the USA in the aftermath of 9/11. They point out that 'Muslim' has become a racial category in the USA and such a category is regarded as a constant threat to the American wider society. They also claim that Muslims' sense of otherness in the USA is exacerbated by a set of stereotypes and representations. According to Morey and Yaqin, 'Muslims are positioned as irretrievably Other presence, both in communities living in the West and in the broader global geo-politics of an ever-shrinking world' (p. 5).
9. Hanif El Eyad, or Han as he appears in *Crescent*, is the co-protagonist in the novel. He is a university teacher of Arabic literature and linguistics in Los Angeles, USA. He is considered an exile after his escape from Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq due to his political orientations. The novel portrays him as a diasporic figure who struggles to overcome the ravages of exile and displacement and cope with his new multicultural/multi-ethnic surroundings.
10. It is worth pointing out, in this context, that examining fictional representations of 'vulnerable' masculinities of Arab men has also productively been tackled in Samira Aghacy's *Masculine Identity in the Fiction of the Arab East Since 1967* (2009). In the chapter entitled 'Dictator as Patriarch: The State and the (Dys)Functional Male' Aghacy provides a critical reading of *Nihayat al-bara'a* (1997) by the Lebanese author Rashid Al-Da'if and *al-Futayt almuba'ther* (2000) by the Iraqi author Muhsin al-Ramli to suggest that the sense of masculinity is framed by powerlessness and volatility, especially if a man encounters political oppression or social prejudice.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).



## Notes on contributor

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