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## Cultural intersection's a study of diasporic Arab women's writing

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### Abstract

Arab-British novelists' protagonists identified themselves as exiles longing to return to the homelands where they are born. While Arab-Americans are born and brought up in America identify themselves as U.S. citizens and insist on equal access. As transnationals negotiating the „pull and push“ between homeland and hostland home becomes a „mythic place of desire“ where they in spirit cannot return though it is possible to visit the geographical territory physically and experience the sense of belonging, home and community. Salma longs to return to her native village, Hima to know the whereabouts of her daughter Layla who constantly haunts her mind in England. Initially due to the fear of honour-killing she is unable to go but in spite the objections of her husband she goes back to Jordan. Sammar too misses her homeland in Scotland and when Rae denies her proposal she leaves Scotland and goes back to Sudan. Najwa also wants to go back to her homeland but it is not possible for her as her family had become the victim of a coup and her father was found guilty and executed. Salma, Sammar Najwa all long to return to the homeland for various reasons but home remains a „mythic place of desire“ for Jemorah, Sirine, Soraya and Salwa because of their double-consciousness makes them fascinate about the land of their origin while enjoying a comfortable life abroad but one marred by racial discrimination and the feeling of being at odds with mainstream America. Arab-American women writers show the way in which a temporal movement from exile to ethnic, from migrant to American has been implicitly disrupted at every juncture. Both the descendants of earlier generations and newer immigrants negotiate and renegotiate their relationship to “Arab spaces of origin” and “American spaces of adoption or birth”. Arab-American writers have claimed a ground space that continued to unsettle assumptions about what it means to be an Arab or an American, or an Arab-American.

**Keywords:** Cultural intersection, diasporic, arab women's writing

### Introductions

Post 9/11 Arab peoples and their cultures have become negatively hyper-visible on the global level and in this era of suspicion, there has also been a growing interest on the part of non-Arab/Muslim people, critics and scholars to know the realities of the Arab world through their own voices. Diasporic Arab women writers writing in English express a consistent need to dispel dominant perceptions of Arabs as the “Others”, veiled oppressed woman, terrorist and patriarchal man, and backward homogenous culture. These writers have contributed immensely to the empowerment of women as they have been able to give voice to the veiled/silence of their lives. From individual stories of oppression and confinement they are articulating the injustice of the community in political and gendered context as they benefit from their position as „outsiders“/ „insiders“ and enter into a dialogue with past and present, the distant and the near. Women writers can be seen as spokespersons for Arab people as well as a bridge in the cultural divide that has plagued the world post 9/11. Although these writers have not received much critical attention and are to a large extent unknown to the public, the authors discussed here are the most visible ones in their respective cultural and geographical contexts.

Issues of diaspora, transnationalism, hybridity and identity enrich the diasporic literature of the twenty first century. Topographical shifting, multiculturalism, homelessness, nostalgia, alienation and hybrid identity are interlinked with diasporic phenomenon. The term “diaspora” is derived from the Greek word *dia* which means “through” and *speirein* which means “to scatter”. Therefore, the word diaspora embodies a notion of a centre, a locus, a “home” from where the dispersion occurs and also a home away from home. Paradoxically, diasporic journeys are essentially about settling down and putting roots “elsewhere”.

Avtar Brah says that as the circumstances of leaving are important so too are those of arrival and settling down and, "all diasporic journeys are lived and re-lived through multiple modalities of gender, „race“, class, religion, language and generation. . . . All diasporas are differentiated, heterogeneous, contested spaces, even as they are implicated in the constitution of a common „we“" (*Feminist* 618). One of the most notable diasporas in the world is the Arab diaspora and in Arabic it is called "*hijrat*". The largest Arab colony in the world is Brazil and the Arab communities are also found in Mexico, Argentina, Columbia, Ecuador and Venezuela. The majority of Arab-Americans come from Syria, Lebanon, Palestine and Jordan. Arabs in Britain mostly come from Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Egypt, Jordan, Yemen, Libya and Sudan.

The terms "Arab" and "Muslim" are often used interchangeably in conversation and it is believed that the two groups are one and the same. However, neither all Arabs are Muslims nor all Muslims are Arabs as Arabs are multiracial, religiously diverse, heterogeneous group of people. The Arab world is considered to include the twenty-two member countries of the League of Arab states and is linked together through three dominant factors: cultural history, religion and language. The cultural and historical link dates back many centuries as Arab people shared similar cultures and believed in similar mythologies and methods of warfare. Shared culture is derived from the fact that more than 90 percent of Arabs are Muslims by faith. The other two dominant factors are a majority religion Islam, though not the only one practiced and a majority language Arabic with many different dialects. Arabs speak Arabic as their mother tongue and feel that they belong to the same nation regardless of race, religion, tribe or region. Islam preaches equality between men and women but it is often misinterpreted to oppress women and treat them as subordinate sex. Before the advent of Islam women were treated as objects of sexual pleasure and had no rights as if they were mere chattels. The Prophet Muhammad wanted to put a stop to all cruelties to women and preached kindness towards them. The *Qur'an* admonishes those men who oppress women:

"O you who believe! You are forbidden to inherit women against their will. Nor should you treat them with harshness, that you may take away part of the dowry you have given them - except when they have become guilty of open lewdness. On the contrary live with them on a footing of kindness and equity. If you take a dislike to them, it may be that you dislike something and Allah will bring about through it a great deal of good. (4:19) Nowhere in the *Qur'an* does a verse indicate that one gender is superior to the other rather it asserts that women and men as being of the same essence created from a single soul and have exactly the same responsibilities and duties. The *Qur'an* declares, "O mankind! Reverence your Guardian-Lord, who created you from a single person, created, of like nature, his mate, and from this pair scattered (like seeds) countless men and women. Reverence Allah, through whom you demand your mutual (rights), and reverence the wombs (that bore you); for Allah ever watches over you" (4:1).

In Islam there is also no difference between men and women as far as their relationship to Allah is concerned as both are promised the same reward for good conduct and the same punishment for evil conduct. The *Qur'an* says, "And

for women are rights over men similar to those of men over women" (2:228). In "Restraint? Sure. Oppression? Hardly", Leila Aboulela writes, "Islam restrains women, but it also restrains men. Both are expected to accommodate their lives around the five daily prayers, fasting during Ramadan, giving to charity and making the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in their lives. The 10 commandments that Islam honors apply to both sexes". The *Qur'an* says that women have souls in exactly the same way as men and will enter Paradise if they do good, "Enter into Paradise, you and your wives, with delight" (43:70), "Who so does that which is right, and believes, whether male or female, him or her will We quicken to happy life" (16:97). The *Qur'an* in addressing the believers often uses the expression, "believing men and women" to emphasise the equality of men and women in regard to their respective duties, rights, virtues and merits:

For Muslim men and women, for believing men and women, for devout men and women, for true men and women, for men and women who are patient and constant, for men and women who humble themselves, for men and women who give in charity, for men and women who fast, for men and women who guard their chastity, and for men and women who engage much in Allah's praise, for them has Allah prepared forgiveness and great reward. (33:35)

In Islam a woman is independent and can make any contract or bequest in her own name. She is entitled to inherit her position as a mother, as a wife, as a sister and as a daughter and has liberty to choose her husband. The Prophet Muhammad also upheld the cause of widows when they were rarely permitted to remarry and encouraged his followers to marry widows. Most of his wives were also widows, Nawar Shora affirms:

The Prophet Mohammad was anxious to emancipate women. . . . Islam gives women rights of inheritance and divorce, which women in the West did not enjoy until the nineteenth century. Islam preaches modesty of both men and women. In an effort to de-objectify themselves in the period of early Islam, converted women began wearing loose clothing and covering their hair, so as no longer to be judged by their bodies, but only their work and words. (35). The *Qur'an* instructs Muslims to show respect to their mothers and serve them well. The Prophet's followers accepted His teachings and brought about a revolution in their social attitude towards women. They no longer considered women as mere chattel but as an integral part of their society. Women became highly active members of society by providing useful service during the wars as they carried provisions for the soldiers, nursed them and even fought alongside them if it was necessary. Thereafter it became common to see women helping their husbands in the fields, carrying on trade and business independently.

The status of women in the Arab world is a culmination of the complex and often problematic, interaction of cultural, social, economic and political aspects. The discrimination experienced by Arab women is based on religious beliefs but many of the limitations are cultural and emanate from traditions. Shora writes, "Unfortunately, as in other aspects of the religion gender equality . . . both political and religious leaders have manipulated Islam so as to make it patriarchal and oppressive to women" (35). Leila Ahmed argues, "Islam had brought a number of positive gains for women . . . and had granted women certain rights but still did not warrant playing down Islam's blatant endorsement

of male superiority and male control of women, or glossing over the harshness of, in particular, its marriage, divorce, and child custody laws" (*Women* 121). Fatima Mernissi says, "Women's rights are a problem for some modern Muslim men, it is neither because of the Koran nor the Prophet, nor the Islamic tradition, but simply because those rights conflict with the interests of a male elite" (*Veil* ix). Amal Abdelrazek writes: Islam per se does not oppress women but, rather, the continuity of patriarchal values within nationalist and religious ideologies limit women's agency. In fact, if Arab/Arab American women had known and asked for rights that Islam originally endowed, they would have never found themselves in such a vulnerable position. If these women had really looked into the Quranic interpretations, they would have realized the dignity and freedom their religion has actually granted them. They would know how to defy any patriarchal oppression wielded over them in the name of religion. Miriam Cooke writes, "Islam,... is not gender-specific but rather a faith system and way of life open equally to women and men" (xiv). Women never blamed Islam for their marginalisation rather their struggles for their rights are based on Islamic concepts. Abdelrazek too asserts, "On the contrary, Islam has endowed Muslim Arab women with rights that, if only they knew about them and ask for them, they will definitely enjoy a dignified life".

The conclusion integrates the findings of the preceding chapters focusing on Arab-British and Arab-American novels with regard to contemporary discourses on feminism, migration and settlement, race and ethnicity, identity and political events like 9/11. This study examined the realities of Arab cultures and concerns from the perspective of diasporic Arab women's writing and represents a means of cultural negotiations and social/political critiques within their societies. By focusing on select literary texts of contemporary diasporic Arab women writers this study examined the intersections of literary production, women's issues and challenges faced by triply marginalised women. The woman writer in third world societies has a triple function, first to write as a woman, secondly as a post-colonial and thirdly as a writer. The diasporic Arab woman writer in addition to all this has also to contend with in-betweenness, hyphenated identity and marginalisation. There is no doubt that Arab woman writers in the diaspora have played a tremendous role by rewriting their own history but scholarship related to this area still remains sketchy so this study is justified.

### **Arab-American literature**

Arab-American literature began around the turn of the twentieth century and contains the works of dozens of novelists, memoirists, poets and playwrights. Whereas Arab-British literature made a tentative debut in the 1940s then re-emerged in the 1980s and remains the province of very few writers. The parallels and continuities between Arab-American and Arab-British literature result from the historical challenges they are facing in the Arab world and as English-speaking emigres who settle in the U.S. and Britain. The significant differences between the conditions and the history of Arab immigration in the U.S. and in Britain led to their identity formation and literature in respective continents. Arab-American identity has been in the making since Arabic speaking immigrants began to arrive in the U.S. in 1870s. On the other hand, Arab-British

identity is not an established or widely used term and in fact it is overshadowed by the pan-ethnic British Muslim identity. Arabs in the U.S. are officially categorised as White, whereas in Britain they are classified as South Asian dominated Muslims. Arab-Americans have a long history of uncertain ethnic classification so they have become hyper-visible in the U.S. since 9/11. On the contrary, Arabs living in Britain have tended to be marginalised and rendered invisible in the racial and ethnic discourses in Britain.

The position Arabs occupy in discourses on ethnicity and multiculturalism in Britain and the U.S. has varying degrees which have influenced these writers' own sense of identity that has been reflected in their works.

### **Arab-British novelists**

The thesis are represented by Fadia Faqir and Leila Aboulela while Arab-American women novelists are Diana Abu-Jaber and Layla Halaby. The selected Arab-American women novelists are members of the third wave of Arab-American writers and come from mixed Arab and American backgrounds while Arab-British women novelists are mainly first generation authors. The comparison between the first wave of Arab-British novelists and the third wave of Arab-American novelists is constructive because both groups identify as Arabs, engage with issues of racialisation and marginalization, and frame their works within a globalised socio-political context. On the other hand, I argue there is little to be gained in comparing the works of the first wave of Arab-American writers to the works of first wave of Arab-British writers because of the historical gap that separates both groups, the different political, economic and social contexts in which they have lived and the thematic differences that permeate their works.

### **Diasporic Arab women writers**

These diasporic Arab women writers are no less than anyone else as they merely carry different cultural values as a result of their different social, cultural, political and religious state of affairs. There are three taboos; religion, sex and politics which these women writers usually fear approaching since they belong to a society in which most individuals are illiterate and whose values are conservative by nature which does not respect women in the first place. In the diaspora Arab women writers are able to give voice to their veiled sentences without any fear that made them heard globally. They experience cultural, geographical and emotional displacement and there emerges a diasporic sensibility that mirrors the plural identity of these writers which is characterised by a pluralistic vision.

For diasporic Arab women writers' personal is always political since they attempt to invent congruence between the world of their characters and their own respective personalities and that too within the context of counter-narratives contesting dominant representational realities in order to construct new realities and become active agents of change. Their writings are more about dialogue of civilizations and less about clash of civilizations between the two cultures they live in. Therefore these writers do not break their relationship with the ancestral land and there is a search for continuity and „ancestral impulse“ an effort to look back at their roots by writing about their homelands.

Faqir's novels depict oppression of Arab women in the form of unhomeliness whether they are at home or in exile. *Pillars of Salt* provides a double vision as patriarchal



discourse by The Storyteller is deconstructed by the twin female discourses of Maha and Um Saad. Maha transgresses an official code of history by telling her own herstory which is itself a story of transgression and is able to counter the history of patriarchy by The Storyteller which has become the real history of Arab women, a dominant discourse. My *Name is Salma* is about Salma's struggle to survive in the homeland and the hostland. Their private world is invaded by the public world in the form of patriarchy and even as refugees they are not safe and are treated as "Others" because as the "second sex" of their societies they are denied access to their share of property and land, and if they dared to rebel they have to face patriarchal anger and oppression. There is always double jeopardy for these women as their private and public spheres are collated because of patriarchy and colonisation. Whether the city or the desert, Bedouin or Western, Arab or England, woman is always considered as an outcast who can't claim her rights anywhere and pays a heavy price for violating traditional silence and obedience. The price of these transgressions can be in the form of beating and honour killing and they can be abandoned in lunatic asylums.

Aboulela's novels represent transnational Islamic feminism as her both texts depict romantic relationships but cultural encounters and ensuing complications, particularly the challenge of remaining a practicing Muslim woman, function as an important thematic powerhouse. In her narratives, religion has the power to heal the fragmentation and alienation experienced by Muslim women in western societies. Her texts are about redemption and fulfilment through Islam as Aboulela materialises the slogan of the Islamist movement that emerged in the mid-1970s, "Islam is the solution." In her representation of Sammar and Najwa, Aboulela counters Oriental narratives and negotiates a way out of stagnant binaries of West and East, by offering a model of progressive socially engaged femininity" rooted in Islamic tradition. She has reiterated the account of Islam as a backward and misogynist religion; and Muslim women as powerless victims of Islam. Sammar and Najwa are both in romance with the veil, for Sammar it is her part of Islamic identity and Najwa wears it to hide her aging body from onlookers but it becomes a talisman for her because it defines her Islamic identity and helps her to fight the curse of anonymity in London. Depicting Muslim women's deep spiritual bonds with Islam, Aboulela provides an alternative to the dominant paradigms of representations of Muslim women in the West since they are mostly depicted as victims of Islam awaiting rescue by the West or escapees of Islam who can only feel liberated in the West.

#### **Abu-Jaber's two novels *Arabian Jazz* and *Crescent***

The third chapter analysed Abu-Jaber's two novels *Arabian Jazz* and *Crescent*, and the leitmotif of the discussion is that women of both the novels being ambivalent about their identities whether they are Arabs or Americans come to discover that they are neither Arabs nor Americans but are Arab-Americans having double-consciousness and live in a median-state. Like a pendulum they are constantly oscillating between the two worlds and voyaging back and forth between two locales and visualise their homelands as well as hostlands as places of violence, discrimination and at times romanticise about them. But music builds the bridge between Arab and American cultures in *Arabian Jazz*, while food and cooking take on this role in *Crescent*.

The relationship between the Arab world and the U.S. is an attempt on the novelist's part to show the role of Arab-Americans in narrowing the political and cultural gaps between the Arab and the American worlds. Abu-Jaber celebrates the U.S. as a nation of many cultures highlighting the importance of differences between cultures in bringing the people of the world closer to each other.

#### **Halaby's novels *West of the Jordan* and *Once in a Promised Land***

The fourth chapter examined Halaby's novels *West of the Jordan* and *Once in a Promised Land* and the leitmotif of the discussion is that women in both the novels being Arab-Americans are negotiating between their twin identities and cultures. The third generation Arab-Americans approach issues related to cross-cultural identities in a homogeneous manner and differ in the way they position themselves between two distinct cultures like Hala, Mawal, Soraya and Khadija do in *West of the Jordan*. Before 9/11 Arab-American entity was „the „invisible“ racial/ethnic group“ of the U.S. but 9/11 dramatically altered this reality and Arab-Americans evolved from invisibility to conspicuity though their conspicuousness was not welcomed. Halaby writes about Salwa and Jassim as Arab immigrants living in the U.S. against the backdrop of 9/11 in *Once in a Promised Land*. In the diaspora there is always a quest for public affirmation on the part of the characters for survival so ethnic assertion becomes "politics of recognition" for them. Halaby's characters neither belong to the Arab world nor to the American world as they keep negotiating with both the cultures simultaneously. Being Arab-Americans Hala, Soraya and Salwa embrace their Arab part and Khadija embraces her American side in order to complete the other side of the hyphen.

This paper has thrown up several similarities between Arab-British and Arab-American writers' novels. Their works have been controversially appropriated by Western publishing houses and academic circles since diasporic Arab women are closely connected to a long and complex history of the West's hostility to Islam. These writers carry the burden of this history and the assumption that their works are manipulated to meet the expectations and assumptions of Western readers are difficult to ignore. Moreover, the ambiguous position Arab communities occupy in ethnic and racial discourses in both countries intersect with publishing interests that greatly influences how post-9/11 anti-Arab racism is represented.

#### **Faqir's novel *Pillars of Salt***

The cover page of Faqir's novel *Pillars of Salt* became controversial because publishers wanted to have Arab women in *hijab* on it to reinforce the myth regarding Arab woman and culture. Initially Faqir denied their demand but had to give her consent because she wanted to publish her novels with reputed publishers. *My Name is Salma* is published in Britain and the U.S. simultaneously but in the U.S. it is published under the title *Cry of the Dove*. Aboulela too had to go through the same situation before publishing her novels in Britain as her novels detail the Islamic identity of her women protagonists. Abu-Jaber's *Arabian Jazz* is considered as the first mainstream novel in the Arab-American genre but she too had to face many problems while publishing. As a result her second novel never got published and *Crescent* published after a gap of ten years of

her first novel. Halaby's publisher wanted to have the cover page of *Once in a Promised*.

*Land* depicting Arab terrorists in aeroplanes destructing the twin towers of Washington. But Halaby refused to do so and eventually the publisher had to print the cover page as per her choice.

The novelists explored in the thesis are those diasporic Arab women novelists who use English as their means of expression in their writings. The thesis excluded the diasporic women writers like Hoda Barakat and Hanan Al-Shaykh who have opted to write in Arabic though their works are translated in English simultaneously, since much is lost in the translations. By focusing on Arab women novelists writing in English, our understanding of Arab identity in the diaspora is enriched as it intersects with issues of immigration, settlement, citizenship and cultural hybridity and allows a direct insight to the author's self presentation of her hyphenated identity. English places these writers in an advantageous position where they can interpret their culture to their readers both in the homeland and the hostland and represents a merger of the two classic stances of the native informant and the foreign expert. This has positioned diasporic Arab women writers as two way translators who not only interpret the „Orient“ to the „Occident“, but also interpret the „Occident“ to the „Orient“.

Orientalism has profoundly influence diasporic women writers who as cultural translators not only resist the Orientalist views of women but also resist Arab fundamentalists who misinterpret Islamic religion to serve their own patriarchal interests and see women's bodies only as a symbol of procreation. In *Pillars of Salt*, Maha and Um Saad defy the traditional role of being a good sister and a good wife respectively since Maha refuses to give her share of property to Daffash and Um Saad raises voice against her husband when he brings the second wife. In *My Name is Salma*, Salma too defies the traditional role of being a good daughter and takes refuge in prison to protect herself from her brother as she has become pregnant out of wedlock and then flees to England. In *The Translator*, Sammar goes to Scotland alone after her mother-in-law refuses to give consent to her remarriage as she thinks that Sammar is literate and independent and does not require the support. But she marries Rae a Christian after he accepts Islam. In *Minaret*, Najwa a fashionable girl turns into a devout Muslim and is prepared to work as a maid to lead an independent life in London. Though Najwa falls in love with her employer's brother Tamer but she is forced to give him up because of his family's disapproval so she decides to go on *hajj* to cleanse her soul.

In *Arabian Jazz*, Jemorah and Melvina both work in a hospital and want to lead their life independently. But Aunt Fatima pressurises them to marry only Arab men which makes Jemorah ambivalent about her identity though Melvina warns her not to succumb to the pressure of being a good daughter and obey her aunt. In *Crescent*, Sirine is working as a chef and living life on her own terms. In *West of the Jordan*, initially Hala lives in America without her father's consent; Soraya defies the traditional role of being a good daughter and does whatever she likes without the permission of her parents. In the end, Khadija gets her own father arrested going against the norms of being a good Arab daughter and challenges the role prescribed by the Arab society. In *Once in a Promised Land* Salwa sacrifices

her relationship with her childhood lover Hassan and her country after she meets Jassim to fulfill her aspirations in America. The protagonists of the texts analysed in this thesis display the capacity for making empowered choices, defy traditional Arab norms of womanhood and use their faith to redefine themselves in the West.

Diasporic Arab women novelists resist assimilation and lay emphasis on hybridity refusing to be restricted to only one position and opening up spaces between the centre and the margins. They straddle two cultures and inhabit „mezzaterra“ a contact zone where cultures interact and constantly hybridise each other creating a cross-cultural dialogue and cross-ethnic identification. Salma marries an Englishman in order to sustain herself in the diaspora but does not change her name. She always keeps the *Qur'an* with her and reads one verse every day in England. Sammar marries Rae Isles, a Christian only after he accepts Islam. Najwa too in London does not succumb to Western values rather she prefers Islamic values and becomes a devout Muslim.

Jemorah's ambivalence about her identity is only due to the presence of both cultures in her life. She is living in America yet she feels under pressure to adopt some Arab traditions which she does not understand because her aunt Fatima insists she marry an Arab man in order to keep alive their Arab heritage. Sirine's cooking skills in Nadia's Cafe attracts people from every culture and ethnic background as the cafe is not only a favourite hangout for Arab immigrants and Arab students but is also frequented by Americans of various hues. Jenoo and Gharb are students from Egypt; Shark from Kuwait since Sirine provides them the other part of their hyphen which they miss in Los Angeles. Besides them Raphael is from New-Jersey; Jay, Ron and Troy from Kappa, and two American policemen too come to the cafe every day and order Arab cuisines. When Sirine meets Hanif an Iraqi she starts missing her father who was an Iraqi-American and becomes ambivalent about her identity and starts investigating her roots.

When Hala goes back to America for higher education she does not leave her Arab heritage in Amman rather makes every attempt to carry it with her. While travelling from Amman to America she wears her mother's *roza* and not western apparel that explicitly shows that she won't leave her Arabness behind rather it coexists with her American one. Salwa has achieved American Dream but her longing for motherhood against the wishes of her husband illustrates her reliance on the Arab community life.

The spirit of Shahrazad is forever present in these writers' writing since they use their art and storytelling as a powerful means of defining themselves, their own experiences and like Shahrazad teaching others „to heal“ and killing „the beast of doubt“ in themselves. Shahrazad's narrative in diasporic Arab women's writing represents a common cultural space through which reinterpretation of stereotypes commences. These novels dispel stereotypes and myths regarding Arab women who are perceived as faceless, belly dancers, harem kittens, sex toys of sultan, oppressed wife clad in black from head to toe, veiled, overly sexed and silenced women categorised as monolithic Arab women in the West. They are dismantling the prevalent stereotypes of Arab women as „odalisque“ by taking up the responsibility by re-presenting social and political realities that shape the lives of actual Arab women in the diaspora.

From the early days of Hollywood silent cinema to the latest blockbuster movies there has been a consistent dehumanising, vilifying representation of Arab men and Arab women. Such re-appropriation is constantly troubled by the danger of further re-inscribing the stereotypes, instead of undermining them. But diasporic Arab women writers highlight the heterogeneity and diversity of Arab women in a way that shatters the homogeneous images that depict them as helpless and passive victims of a relentless Arab and Muslim patriarchy. Though Shahrazad was denied agency in nineteenth-century to speak out but she regains agency in twenty-first century diasporic Arab women's writing and is able to subvert the myths that women are helpless victims of their circumstances and powerlessness in the form of imprisonment, enslavement, seclusion, silence and invisibility. Rather they are active participants in the unfolding of events around them and are not in the background but are in the forefronts of Arab society.

Faqir acknowledges herself as Shahrazad who is not allowed to „sing the song“ in the Arab world but is able to voice herself in the West and re-present the harsh realities of Arab women like sexual violence and honour killing. Maha and Salma both are Bedouin but they are not silent and meek rather they are defiant against their victimisation. Aboulela by telling the stories of Sammar and Najwa demonstrates that though these women retain their Islamic faith in the diaspora but lead their lives on their own terms. Aboulela is demystifying the myth that these women need West to save them from Islam by illustrating that these women are self sufficient to handle their affairs and do not need any Western men to save them from their crisis in life. Rather their Islamic faith strengthens them to help Rae and Tamer respectively who are in crisis.

Abu-Jaber's protagonists Jemorah and Sirine both are half Arabs and half Americans and both are single leading their lives independently and dismantling the myth that Arab women are either veiled or belly dancers. Jemorah is almost thirty struggling with her dual identity and consciousness but is working efficiently in a hospital. When her boss Portia asks her to shun her Arabness and adopt Americanism Jemorah leaves her job immediately as she refuses to accept racial stereotyping. Like Shahrazad was able to save her kingdom from the tyrant King, Jemorah is able to save herself from the tyrant Portia who looks down upon Arabs. Sirine is thirty-nine works in a cafe as a chef who attracts everyone with her cooking skills and kills the notion that Arab woman is faceless and dependent.

Like Shahrazad Halaby is telling the stories of Hala, Mawal, Soraya and Khadija who insist on making their voices heard by decoding their silences through the narratives of their displacement and subvert the myth that Arab woman is silent and meek as all of them are defiant and transgress the social codes of the Arab society. Hala goes to America without her father's consent. Soraya defies the social and moral codes of society by disobeying her mother and does whatever she desires. In *Once in a Promised Land* Halaby narrates about Salwa and Jassim who are living like affluent Americans in America face racial discrimination after 9/11 and the fact is that they have nothing to do with 9/11 attacks and moreover they heard about the attacks from their relatives in Jordan. Halaby narrates that post 9/11 generated hatred against Arabs who are actually innocent and the people who attacked the twin towers are fundamentalists and Arabs don't share their point of view with them thus subverts the myth that Arabs are terrorists and backward.

The narrative techniques used by diasporic women writers mostly centre on personal narratives which employ „back and forth“ narration. Feminist autobiography is often characterised by the implicitly communal identity of the author, who presents her experience as representational rather than unique. These novelists detail every facet of characters to illustrate authentic cultures of both homeland and hostland since novelists oscillate between the two cultures of Arab and British/America. They are doubly displaced both from homeland and hostland since they don't live in homeland for respective reasons and in hostland they are not fully accepted by the native people. Maha and Um Saad narrate about their stories in the lunatic asylum by using flashback technique illustrating pathetic conditions Arab women live and struggle for their rights in their homes and as well as refugees. In the lunatic asylum they are constantly told to remain silent and if they do not obey they would be subjected to electrical shocks. *My Name is Salma* is too structured by episodic flashbacks but set predominantly in Britain with the first person narrative that exemplify that how Salma has made survival possible for herself by taking refuge in a prison in the homeland after her brother invokes honour killing against her. In England too she struggles as an Arab to survive and remains nostalgic about her daughter who was snatched from her after birth immediately. When she goes back to meet her daughter in Jordan she finds that her daughter has been killed by her maternal uncle and thereafter Salma too becomes the victim of honour killing. *The Translator* is divided into two parts and follows the same technique of writing „back and forth“. The first part of the novel is mainly about Sammar's living in Scotland and the second part is about her stay in Sudan. She was born in Scotland to Sudanese parents who studied there and returned home when she was seven years old. Sammar makes three journeys to the north as an adult: first with her husband then alone after his death and finally with Rae after his conversion. Only the first two northward journeys are described in the novel, which focuses mainly on the protagonist's second interval in Scotland and her return to Sudan after her estrangement from Rae. Sammar's first journey is reported in flashback and the third journey is likely to be repeated with her son and Rae in the future. *Minaret* too uses „back and forth“ technique which is divided into six parts chronicling Najwa's pre-exile and post-exile attitudes towards the people around her. The first part describes how Najwa enjoys in Sudan as a part of an elite fashionable society and the other five parts are about Najwa's life in London as an exile. Amid financial and emotional difficulties in London she recollects her comfortable life in Sudan but now she finds comfort and solace in her faith about which she was ignorant during her affluent days.

*Arabian Jazz* uses flashback technique to illuminate Jemorah's past as within the family sphere, she is aware of the difficulty of reconciling the two worlds in which she grew up. As a child, Jemorah witness the conflicts between her American mother and Arab aunt due to family oriented Arab life and individual materialism of American culture. Jemorah's visit to Jordan with her family and her mother's sudden death during that trip bound her not to do anything and entangled her in that limbo of time. As she was unable to do anything when her mother was dying and she was the only one who was watching her mother dying and the rest of the family was unaware. When she grew up she was bound



to adopt some Arab traditions in America which she does not understand so for her doing nothing is the safe option that makes her ambivalent about her identity. In *Crescent* initially Sirine is comfortable with her American identity yet she feels a bond towards her Iraqi heritage. When she meets Hanif she falls in love and starts longing for her father and her Iraqi heritage. Both share their memories with each other Sirine tells him about her parents' death and their job, and how her father taught her mother to cook Arab food and they enjoyed each other's company. Hanif tells Sirine about his life in Iraq, his education in Cairo, his writings against Saddam Hussein's regime under pseudonym Ma'al and then why and how he escaped Saddam Hussein's atrocities and fled to London and reached America. The picture of Iraq by Hanif left an indelible remark on Sirine's mind because she had never visited Iraq and it raised several doubts in her mind and created ambivalence about her identity.

Using "back and forth" technique each chapter of the novel *West of the Jordan* is a thought based title as each of the narrators understands and respond to it in a way that plays an important role in shaping her life. Hala's visit to Jordan illustrates that she feels a bond towards her homeland though she initially feels uncomfortable and keeps distance from everyone including her elder sister and is always engrossed in her late mother's memories. But when she meets Sharif he rekindles childhood memories and she understands that she has roots in Jordan and cannot live without her Arab part in America or vice versa. Mawal never crosses borders physically yet she understands diasporic people because she hears the stories of immigrant people who have left their homelands and moreover, she has cousins and uncles in America. Through Mawal's episodes, Halaby is demonstrating how life being different in the homeland and in the hostland for immigrants and those who were left behind in the homeland suffer because of the absence of their loved ones. In *Once in a Promised Land* through flashback it is narrated that Salwa left her homeland and her childhood lover Hassan to achieve American Dream which she thought was possible by marrying Jassim who was a hydrologist in America. Same is the case with Jassim who married Salwa because she was an American citizen by birth and he saw her as key to permanent settlement in America. "Back and forth" technique is used in the novel to differentiate the life in homeland and hostland led by Salwa and Jassim. Though they achieved their ambitions and live like wealthy Americans but after 9/11 Jassim faces an unjustified FBI investigation against him and loses his job that makes him realise that he is not an American but just an Arab living in America.

The novels discussed in the thesis are semi-autobiographical writings and a means of „writing away the prison“ by subverting dominant hegemonies and reasserting agency, a means of voicing their silent narratives to negotiate a „textual, sexual and linguistic space“ globally. So writing about themselves becomes an act of defiance and assertion of individual identity. Faqir is partly a Bedouin so are her protagonists, her father was an authoritative tyrant so her protagonists' fathers are depicted in the same manner. Faqir suffered and left her homeland to settle down in England and experienced unhomeliness like the characters in her novels. Aboulela is defending her own beliefs as an Islamic feminist in her novels. Rather than yearning to embrace western culture Aboulela's women seek solace in their

religious identity in the diaspora. Abu-Jaber is influenced by her father a Jordanian immigrant who tells her tales about his country and his family he had come from and the way he saw the world. So Abu-Jaber writes about her father's heritage and world in her novels and acknowledges that Aunt Fatima, Hanif and characters like Portia in *Arabian Jazz*, and Rana in *Crescent* are familiar to her. Not much personal information on Halaby is available but her writing is about her own conflicts being the offspring of mixed parentage and the racial discrimination faced by her in post 9/11 America.

### Arab women

There is no doubt that diasporic women's writing has broken new ground in presenting a realistic picture of Arab women. But in some way Arab women are complicit in their oppression since she lacks independent resources to sustain herself she is content with her role as the „Other“. Very often their desire to conform to lay down norms for women becomes a reason for their troubles. Salma knows her life is at risk but she gives precedence to her duty as a mother and returns home to look for her daughter Layla and becomes a victim of honour-killing. Sammar does not want to risk her mother-in-law's disapproval so she chose not to marry the man she admires. Najwa leaves Tamer because her culture frowns upon a woman marrying a younger man. Jemorah gives in to Aunt Fatima's pressure and Mawal despite being attracted to the American lifestyle does not want to settle down there because both in their heart of hearts want to conform. Khadija is not comfortable with her name but feels it will be disrespectful to ask her father to change it. Confused between what they want and what is expected of them makes them give in to what they believe is the right way to behave for an Arab woman.

The question of identity remains the same for Arab women in homeland as well as in hostland since they are marginalised in both. Maha and Um-Saad both are regarded as the „Other“ whether they are in homeland or in exile illustrating that change of place does not change the status of their identity. Salma takes refuge in the prison to protect herself from her brother but her daughter is immediately taken from her after birth and in the hostland too she has to struggle for her livelihood and faces racism from her landlady who treats her like a slave because she is an Arab. Sammar leaves Sudan after the dispute over her remarriage and in Scotland except Rae all her colleagues view her as an "Oriental" woman. Arab-American women Jemorah, Sirine, Soraya, Salwa all are born and brought up in America but all face racial discrimination in America and in their families except Sirine and Salwa they all are regarded as second class citizens who have to obey the traditions and values of their Arab culture in order to become "good Arab" girls.

Like the „wandering tongue“ physical and social mobility is considered an aberration in an Arab woman since it takes her away from her „right place“. Yet social mobility is a characteristic which most diasporic Arab women share. For Arab-British women it becomes compulsion for them to move in order to survive. Maha goes to the mountains in order to escape the wrath of her brother who wants her to get married again. Salma leaves her homeland in order to protect herself from her brother. Sammar leaves Sudan in order to earn her livelihood after the death of her husband and Najwa leaves her homeland because of the political

coup. As Arab-Americans are born and brought up in America social mobility is a choice for them and not a compulsion. Jemorah as a child visits Jordan to see her father's family along with her parents and Sirine wants to visit Iraq to find the whereabouts of Hanif but couldn't because of travel restrictions during the Gulf War. Hala visits Jordan to see her dying grandmother and then goes back to America to continue her higher education. Salwa was born and brought in America but was living in Jordan with her parents and then moves back to America after her marriage to Jassim to fulfill her American Dream.

Arab women are victims of sexual and domestic violence as their lives are either controlled by male members or exploited by elderly woman of the family to maintain male dominance and female subordination to confirm centuries long Arab traditions. Maha is beaten up by her brother for defying him and thrown out of the house and put in the lunatic asylum. Um Saad is also forcefully sent to the asylum by her husband. Salma's brother invokes honour-killing against Salma as she becomes pregnant out of wedlock and Sammar's mother-in-law does not give her consent to Sammar to get married again. After losing her virginity to Anwar Najwa proposes to him but he refuses to marry her and Tamer's mother forces Najwa to break her relationship with her son. Jemorah is unable to find a suitable match and is forced by her aunts to marry her one-eyed cousin Nassir. Hala, Mawal, Soraya and especially Khadija live in patriarchal society and all have to obey their parents. Khadija's father beats her every day in order to overcome his frustration at his failure in America. Salwa too is beaten by Jack when she tells him that she is going back to Jordan.

### **Arab-British and Arab-American novelists: The intersection**

Despite the commonalities between Arab-British and Arab-American novelists there are certain differences between them since diasporic Arab women writers have not responded uniformly to the cultural, racial, religious and political discourses. Individual writers have negotiated historical, ideological and discursive conditions in ways that vary according to education, profession, national origin, political ideology and personal temperament, as well as family, class and religious background. Faqir, a university teacher was born in a conservative Jordanian tribe near Amman to a Bedouin father and a Circassian mother. Due to the supremacy of patriarchy and woman's position at the bottom of the social hierarchy in the Arab world, Faqir left her homeland to settle down in England. Aboulela was born in Cairo and grew up with parents of different nationalities as her father was Sudanese and mother was an Egyptian. Her life is characterised by the movement between a numbers of different cultures so travel plays a pivotal role in her writing career. Abu-Jaber teaches feminism and Middle East Studies in Portland State University and has lived between the U.S. and Jordan being the daughter of an American mother and an Arab father and this sort of hybrid life permeate her writings. Halaby is working as outreach Counsellor in Arizona and her mix parentage leads her to move between East and West, and vice versa that influenced her writings.

For Faqir, Islam is the reason for the century's long oppression of women in the Arab world and for their unhomely state. On the contrary, Aboulela seeks Islamic

identity for the empowerment of Arab women whether they live in the Arab world or in the diaspora. Sammar and Najwa both drive their respective plots by their own choices and follow Islamic teachings throughout and do not compromise with them whatever the situation is. Abu-Jaber writes about the ambivalence of identity of Arab-Americans whether they are Arabs or Americans and eventually understand that they are hyphenated Arab-Americans. Halaby presents the current scenario of Arab-Americans as they make cultural negotiations simultaneously with both the cultures of Arab and America.

### **Conclusion**

Arab-British novels revolve around sociopolitical themes such as migration, exile, marriage, love, friendship, academic research work and religion. Salma imposes self exile after she becomes pregnant out of wedlock and works as a seamstress to earn her livelihood in Britain. Sammar too imposes self exile after the death of her husband and works as a translator in Scotland. Najwa works as a maid in London in order to earn her livelihood as she has left with no one to look after her. On the other hand, Arab-American novelists Abu-Jaber and Halaby portray the concern of parents about the future of their children in America. Jemorah's Aunt Fatima is very much concerned about the future of her nieces and wants them to get married to Arabs only. Sirine's uncle is also worried about her future as she is thirty-nine and single. Hala's father and mothers of Khadija and Soraya are too worried about their children's future in America as they do not adhere to the traditional values of their Arab heritage and want to adopt Americanism. Arab-British writers, Faqir and Aboulela's plots centre on the displaced Arab women who are forced to live in the diaspora in order to sustain their lives. Faqir's characters Maha and Um Saad are displaced from their respective hometowns to the lunatic asylum by their male relatives. Salma is forced to leave her homeland for Britain in order to protect herself from honour-killing by her brother. Aboulela's protagonist, Sammar is forced to leave her homeland, Sudan for Scotland to earn her livelihood after the death of her husband. Najwa is too forced to leave her homeland, Sudan for London in order to sustain herself after the execution of her father during a coup.

While Arab-American writers Abu-Jaber and Halaby engage with issues of discrimination and anti-Arab racism faced by Arab-American communities. Jemorah though born and brought up in America faces anti-racism in her office from her boss Portia and by her friends in the neighbourhood. Sirine in Los Angeles is also exposed to anti-racism during Gulf-war. Soraya faces anti-racism while she is with Walid in a restaurant and men on the next table pass derogatory remarks about them and beat Walid and when police intervenes she realises that it is hard to live as an Arab in America. Salwa faces anti racism after 9/11 in her office by her colleagues and Jassim too faces anti-racism when he accidentally hits a boy with his car and becomes the target off.

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