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**DIASPORA AND GENDER RELATIONS IN  
LAILA HALABY'S *WEST OF THE JORDAN***

**Belo Horizonte**

**Faculdade de Letras**

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**DIAPORA AND GENDER RELATIONS IN LAILA  
HALABY'S *WEST OF THE JORDAN***

By

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation has, as its object of study, the novel *West of the Jordan* (2003), written by Laila Halaby. I intend to analyze the diasporic experiences of three Arab-American narrator-characters: Khadija, Soraya, and Hala, as well as the gender relations developed by them. I will also analyze the character Mawal, who, in spite of not being diasporic, helps to shed light on the other characters' conditions as hyphenated subjects. My main contention is that, in the novel, diasporic experiences are heterogeneous and Hala is the only narrator-character that is able to deal with her sense of displacement, working as a sort of mediator between the Arab and the American culture. In order to prove my point, I will probe into each character's experiences and their diverse ways of dealing with their diasporic conditions.

## RESUMO

O presente trabalho tem como objeto de estudo o romance *West of the Jordan* (2003), escrito por Laila Halaby. Pretendo analisar as experiências diaspóricas de três narradoras-personagens árabe-americanas: Khadija, Soraya e Hala, assim como as relações de gênero desenvolvidas por elas. Analisarei, também, a personagem Mawal que, apesar de não ser diaspórica, ajuda a iluminar a condição de sujeitos hifenizados das outras três personagens. Meu principal argumento é o de que, no romance, a condição diaspórica é heterogênea e Hala é a única personagem capaz de lidar com sua sensação de deslocamento, funcionando como uma espécie de mediadora entre a cultura árabe e a americana. A fim de comprovar minha hipótese, investigarei as experiências de cada personagem, assim como as maneiras distintas com as quais cada uma lida com sua condição diaspórica.

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## **Introduction**

Arab immigration to the United States, according to Tanyss Ludescher, dates back to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and, as she states, Arab-American literature “mirrors the patterns of Arab American history, which scholars have traditionally divided into three phases, based on the three distinct waves of Arab immigrants who came to the US” (93). The first wave of Arab immigrants in the United States ranges from 1880 until 1924, and was composed of Lebanese, Syrians and Palestinians, who were documented as Turks, because of the domination of the Ottoman Empire. These people, however, identified themselves as Syrians and since they used to travel all around the United States working as itinerant peddlers, their assimilation was accelerated, and because of the strong contact with the American culture and the English language, these immigrants “enthusiastically embraced American values” (Ludescher 93). The literary production of this group of immigrants was almost inexistent, and it was restricted to the publication, in the US, of Arabic-language newspapers.

The second wave of immigration began after the World War II, and it was made up of a great number of Palestinians who became homeless and stateless after the Arab-Israeli War, in 1948. Differently from the immigrants of the first wave, who were mostly Christians and illiterate, most of the people from the second wave were educated Muslims, who were also skilled professionals. Because of this higher level of education, these immigrants were more in contact with the events taking place in their homelands, unlike the Syrian Christians, and even identified themselves as Arabs.

The third wave of immigration started in 1967 and continues until nowadays. Some happenings along this period, such as new immigration laws that established the end of a quota system, and the Lebanese Civil War in the 70's and 80's, contributed to a

greater flow of immigrants. This group has, as its main feature, the involvement in nationalist movements and the attention to the political events in their homelands. According to Ludescher, “for the first time, Arab American organizations were formed to defend the Arab point of view and to combat negative stereotypes of Arabs in the popular press” (94). Ludescher adds that the Palestinian cause became the main concern of these Arab immigrants, regardless of their national background.

Among these groups of immigrants, the existence of a specific literary group needs to be highlighted. The *Mahjar*, which in Arabic means “place of immigration”, refers to the works produced by immigrants in North and South America. In South America, the Mahjar was centered in Brazil and presented traditional and conservative features, and in North America, the group revolved around Kahlil Gibran. Besides Gibran, other prominent figures of this group are the authors Ameen Rihani and Mikhail Naimy, and among their main themes were

the desperate need to escape the mundane materialism of the peddler lifestyle; . . . admiration for American vitality and hatred of American materialism; a desire for reform in the Arab world; acute concern about international politics and the political survival of the homeland; an obsessive interest in East/West relations; and a desire to play the role of cultural intermediary. (Ludescher 97)

Therefore, writers were basically concerned with a cultural and political transformation of the East, while spiritually changing the West, based on the teachings from the East. The importance of the *Mahjar* group lies on the fact that it is considered the first literary school in Arabic, but, in America, this group is not granted with status and privilege, including Gibran, who, despite being well-known in America, is not acknowledged by critics.



After having outlined the development of the Arab literary movement in the US, it is important to comment on its current situation. According to Ludescher,

the defining moment in the history of Arab American literature came with the publication of two anthologies of Arab American literature, a twenty-page collection called *Wrapping the Grape Leaves: A Sheaf of Contemporary Arab-American Poets* (1982), edited by Gregory Orfalea, and the larger and more comprehensive anthology, *Grape Leaves: A Century of Arab-American Poetry* (1988), edited by Orfalea and Sharif Elmusa. (103)

The importance of these anthologies is the fact that they made it possible for common readers to get acquainted with Arab-American writers, some of which are contemporary ones. Besides these literary works, another important one is the autobiographical novel *Children of the Roojme: A Family's Journey* (1991), by Elmaz Abinader. The publication of this book was especially important because the author gives realistic accounts of the hardships experienced by immigrants, besides exploring the different ways in which men and women relate to diasporic conditions.

Arab-American literature really began to flourish in the middle of the 90's, having female authors as its main representatives. Besides, different from what used to happen, in the last decade, Arab American literature has been included in school curricula and many scholars around the world have dedicated their researches to it. Ludescher states that two factors highly contributed to the growth of Arab-American literature. According to her,

the first was the search for voices outside the traditional canon of Anglo-American male literature, a search which led to the burgeoning interest in ethnic American writers. The second factor, like so many things in the

Arab American community, was political. Recent events in the Arab world combined to raise the political consciousness and solidarity of the Arab American community. (106)

Regarding the second factor, it is possible to notice that Arab-American writers have tried to combat stereotypes regarding their community and have shown a connection to their roots and homelands. Besides, there was an increased interest in the Arab community after the happenings of 9/11.

When it comes to the issues facing contemporary Arab-American writers, their main concern is related to establish “what constitutes Arab-American literature” (106). Ludescher points out several questions that these writers have to deal with nowadays, since the Arab-American group is extremely broad, such as: “Should Arab American writers focus on the Arab side of experience, emphasizing the traditions and values of the Arab world, or should they focus on the American side of experience, emphasizing American immigrant experience in the context of multiculturalism?” (106). Therefore, it is known that the main issue facing Arab-Americans is related to constructing identities and positioning themselves amongst many possibilities.

Another issue that Arab-American writers need to face is related to the social and ethnic status that members of this ethnic group have in the American society. The problem is that Arab-Americans occupy a contradictory position, since, as Lisa Suhair Majaj states, they are, officially, considered white, but this does not prevent them from suffering prejudice, just like other non-white groups. According to Majaj,

Arab-Americans currently are officially classified as white. This classification, although seeming to grant inclusion in mainstream American society, is ambiguous . . . Classification as ‘white’ means that Arab-American experiences of racism and discrimination often go

unaddressed on the basis that ‘white’ people cannot suffer racism. (“Arab American Ethnicity” 321)

Therefore, what would seem to be a comfortable situation for Arab-Americans – being officially equaled to non-hyphenated Americans – turns out to be even a greater problem, since no efforts are made in order to stop racism against them. The Arab-Americans, then, suffer racism and exclusion, but this, unlike what happens to other ethnic groups in the U.S., is regarded as invisible or inexistent.

Because of this complex status occupied by Arab-Americans in the United States, Arab-American writers, consequently, face and address, in their works, these complicated identity issues. Majaj, who suggests that coalitions and negotiations between Arabs and other marginalized groups is a possible solution for the problem of Arab-Americans, extends this need of connection to Arab-American writers as well, through what she calls “literary negotiations” (“Arab American Ethnicity” 326). According to Majaj, “contemporary Arab-American literature increasingly reflects the awareness of the need to forge connections beyond the insular boundaries of group identity” (“Arab American Ethnicity” 326). Therefore, as the critic believes, Arab-American writers should not solely focus on ethnic themes, but rather, they should expand their concerns, since “Arab-American identity is not an end goal to be celebrated but a starting point from which to redefine and resituate concepts of identity, relationship and community” (“Arab American Ethnicity” 326). Thus, Majaj believes that literature is an effective way to improve the situation of Arab-Americans in the United States, since it can help in the articulation of their own identity issues in association with identity politics within other groups and communities.

Gregory Orfalea also highly regards the importance of Arab-American writers to the improvement of the situation lived by these people in the United States. According to him,

Arab American fiction is making fascinating strides. The voice of people who bear the burden of a unique history in the United States is becoming more confident. It is confident enough . . . to create a strong, at times joyful, more often agonizing linkage to the Arab world. And this is no surprise. With American warships and armies splayed out across the entire Middle East hunting for the elusive Fountain of Terror – a complete reversal of those adventurers who came to the New World for the Fountain of Youth – we have something to say, something to get across that matters, something to stand for. It is called humanness. In any case, there has been no value – and a great deal of harm – in letting others say it for us. (132)

Therefore, Orfalea highlights the fact that other people have spoken on behalf of Arab-Americans for too long, causing damage to this people, but now it is time for them to make their own voices be heard. Moreover, he is critical of the fact that the American government invades the Arab World with violent purposes, while the first Arabs who went to the United States were in search of a better life, without harming the people who were already living there. Thus, he implies that Arab-American writers, in the presence of this situation, need, at least, to speak their minds in favor of the Arabs.

The newest generation of Arab-American writers dates from the mid 1990's and the "fascinating strides" mentioned by Orfalea are also noticed by Ludescher, who calls attention to the fact that, recently, Arab-American literature has begun to be more accessible to the American audience in general, mainly through school curricula. She

states: “In the last decade, in particular, the works of Arab-American writers were taught in the college curriculum, and conferences were held that were devoted specifically to Arab-American literature” (105). Ludescher attributes this increasing attention to Arab-American literature to two factors. The first one, she writes, is related to “the search for voices outside the traditional canon of Anglo-American male literature, a search which led to the burgeoning interest in ethnic American writers” (106). The other factor is political and has to do with the raising of awareness among the Arab-Americans. According to Ludescher, “recent events in the Arab world combined to raise the political consciousness and solidarity of the Arab-American community” (106). As a result of these two motivations, Arab-American writers have been creating works of great literary value, and which contribute to a more faithful portrayal of their people – one which does not ignore the multiplicity of their experiences.

Among these authors is Laila Halaby. Born in Lebanon to a Jordanian father and an American mother, Halaby went to the United States in the 1960s, when she was still a baby. Years later, she returned to Jordan to study folklore for a year, and then moved back to Arizona. Not considering herself an Arab-American, since, according to her, she is Arab *and* American, Halaby has always felt caught between two different cultures: “I was always in this purgatory stage of ‘otherness’, neither here nor there” (Interview). This experience of living between two cultures allowed Halaby to transfer all her awareness of this state onto her novels, translated into the sense of displacement of several of her characters. Halaby writes poetry, children’s fiction and she has written two novels so far: *Once in a Promised Land* (2007), which tells the story of a couple who left Jordan to live in Arizona, and needs to cope with the constant paranoia against Arabs in the U.S., and *West of the Jordan*, published in 2003.

*West of the Jordan*, her first novel, which won the PEN / Beyond Margins Award, is made up of various chapters narrated in the voices of four different narrators. Its confessional and intimate tone gives one the impression of reading a series of personal journal entries filled with lyricism. The four narrator-characters of the book – the cousins Hala, Soraya, Khadija and Mawal, who are late teenagers, – tell their stories “slow and tasty... no rushing” (1) and, thus, the chapters are about four different lives and offer multiple views of the world. Hala was born in Jordan, to a Jordanian father and a Palestinian mother, and besides the already distinct Arab backgrounds she inherited from her parents, she also experienced contact with the American culture, since she moved to the United States in order to study. Soraya and Khadija – the latter U.S. born – grew up in America, but their parents are Arab. Their mothers are from Nawara, in Palestine, the same place where the mothers of the other two girls are from. Unlike her three cousins, though, Mawal has never been to United States. However, the fact that she remained in Nawara during her entire life does not mean that ‘America’ is completely alien to her, since the many members of her family who live there end up influencing her worldview and beliefs.

When I read this novel for the first time, I was immediately struck by its interestingly intertwined plot which presented characters with multiple facets and experiences, and, thus, each chapter introduced me to intense stories always told with delicateness and subtlety. It was also interesting to notice that, despite being from the same family and sharing many similarities, the girls have different backgrounds and personal specificities which make them have distinct attitudes towards their condition as hybrid subjects, as it is the case of Hala, Soraya and Khadija, and as non-hybrid subjects, but who suffer cross-cultural influences, as it is the case of Mawal. Therefore, I started analyzing the issues of heterogeneity within diaspora present in the novel, and I

could see that this could not be fully researched without considering issues of gender in the novel, which are constantly present through the relations established by the four narrator-characters: relations to other people and also to the American and the Arab cultures.

With this in mind, and by analyzing the four female character-narrators in *West of the Jordan*, the first main contention of this dissertation is that the experience of diaspora is marked by gender relations, and even the gendered diasporic condition is heterogeneous. The other contention is that each of the narrator-characters positions herself differently against their diasporic background, despite being from the same ethnic group and from the same family. These differences make Hala be the only character that is able to achieve a certain degree of balance between the Arab and the American culture, working as a sort of mediator between these two environments.

In the Introduction, I will include considerations related to theories of diaspora which will guide the analyses of my whole work. Statements made by Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur, James Clifford, and Stuart Hall, which will be presented in the Introduction, are the main directions that I will follow regarding diaspora issues. Moreover, in this section, I will present considerations related to gender, always connected to diaspora. Theories by Susan Stanford Friedman, Ella Shohat, Floya Anthias, Susan Muaddi Darraj, and James Clifford will be introduced so that readers can become acquainted with the approaches to gender that I have chosen to support my literary analyses.

I decided to divide my chapters based on the characters that are going to be analyzed, and not on themes, because this will allow me to explore each character more deeply, and to make a more thorough analysis of each of them. Since one the main contentions of this dissertation is to show that the diasporic experience, in Halaby's

novel, is heterogeneous, by dividing the chapters according to characters, I believe that I can explore all the aspects of each character's diasporic conditions in each chapter, resulting in a final comparison at the end of the dissertation. Moreover, this division will allow me to privilege literary interpretation related to issues of diaspora and gender over considerations about such issues in isolation.

In Chapters I and II, I will analyze the two narrator-characters that are second generation immigrants, Soraya and Khadija. In Chapter I, Khadija's constant sense of displacement, both within the domestic realm and within the public/American one, will be my focus. I will analyze the reasons for the sense of loss experienced by the character, as well as the consequences of this for her, someone who has never been to Palestine, but who does not feel at home in the United States either. Rajagopalan Radhakrishnan is the main theoretician who will sustain my analyses of Khadija. In Chapter II, I will probe into Soraya's supposed rebelliousness and freedom and I will investigate how these behaviors are related to her desire to be accepted in the United States, and whether she ends up being successful or not. In this chapter, I will specifically rely on Nathalie Handal's discussions about sexuality, and Nada Elia's analyses of stereotypes of Arab people in the United States. Susan Friedman's considerations about agency will also shed light on Soraya's behaviors. Discussions related to these two characters' conditions as second generation immigrants will be guided by considerations on the subject made by Andreas Huyssen, Mannur, and Braziel. Even though memory is not the main topic of this dissertation, its discussion is fundamental when dealing with issues of diaspora, and assertions made by Michael Pollak and Mary Chamberlain will be useful for these discussions.

In Chapter III, through the analysis of the character Mawal, I will probe into the perspectives of those people who stay behind. Despite the fact that Mawal does not



actively participate in diaspora movements, her presence in the novel is very important for the understanding of her diasporic cousins, since she works as a counterpoint of them. In this section, I will work with two different concepts of “diaspora space”, one by Avtar Brah, and the other by Nicholas Van Hear. Nadine Naber’s studies about the condition of Arab women will be used in the discussion about Palestinian women. Márcio Seligmann-Silva’s and Fernando Frochtengarten’s considerations about oral memory and oral narratives will shed light on a crucial issue regarding Mawal: Palestinian women’s empowerment through the sharing of experiences. Finally, Amal Talaat Abdelrazek’s hypothesis of Mawal being a displaced character will be exposed and contested.

In Chapter IV, Hala’s negotiations between the Arab and the American world will be investigated. The character’s attempts to deal with the two sides of her hyphenated identity will be analyzed, as well as the strategies used by her in order to achieve a certain balance within the unavoidable displacement inherent to diasporic subjects. Here, I will mainly rely on Stuart Hall’s considerations about hybridism, while Susan Muaddi Darraj and Zeina Zaatari will support my deconstruction of stereotypes related to Arab men and women. Pierre Nora’s theories of sites of memory, and his assumptions about modern memory, together with the functions of memory proposed by Zofia Rosinska’s will be used in my discussion of the relation between Hala and her memories. Finally, Susan Friedman’s ideas about homesickness will also be present in this section.

The relevance of this study is justified by the fact that, as the renowned Palestinian-American critic Lisa Majaj has stated, in the article entitled “New Directions: Arab American Writing at Century’s End,” the case of Arab feminism, and by extension Arab-American feminism, is a crucial point of investigation because it has

more often than not been mistaken as a rejection of a woman's Arab background ("New Directions" 73). As the present dissertation will show through a literary investigation, there are ways in which Arab-American women may advocate a gender perspective while maintaining a cultural attachment to the traditions of their homeland.

Besides, by investigating the heterogeneity of women characters in *West of the Jordan*, this dissertation intends to contribute to the deconstruction of some stereotypes related to Arab-American women, privileging, however, a deep and thorough *literary* analysis. Finally, the relevance of this dissertation also lies on the fact that there are few works about the literary representation of Arab-American feminism,<sup>1</sup> and, mainly, there are not many analyses of *West of the Jordan*,<sup>2</sup> which allows my research work to contribute to a field that has not been fully explored yet.

In order to proceed with the analysis of the corpus and the research outlined in this Introduction, I find it necessary to lay out some of the key critical concepts that support my work. First of all, I will probe into the notions of diaspora. The term "diaspora" is "etymologically derived from the Greek term *diasperien*, from *dia* – , "across" and – *sperien*, "to sow or scatter seeds"" (Braziel and Mannur 1). Therefore, diaspora refers to groups of people who were "dislocated from their native homeland through the movements of migration, immigration, or exile" (Braziel and Mannur 1). Diaspora, thus, is always related to dislocation from one place and to relocation in other places.

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<sup>1</sup> The most relevant works about Arab-American feminism are the book *Food for Our Grandmothers. Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists* (1994), edited by Joanna Kadi, and an issue of *The MIT Electronic Journal of Middle East Studies* entitled "Arab and Arab-American Feminist Perspectives" (2005). See my works cited for the full reference.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout my research, I could only find one work about *West of the Jordan*, which is the chapter "In-Between Women and Narratives of Displacement in West of the Jordan by Laila Halaby", present in the book *Contemporary Arab-American Women Writers: Hyphenated Identities and Border Crossing* (2007), written by Amal Talaat Abdelrazek. See my works cited for the full reference.

The two earliest diasporic movements are the Jewish and the African, as theorists in general point out. The former movement refers to the exile of Jews from Palestine, around the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC, while the latter refers to the slave trade by Europeans of African peoples, who were dispersed into the “New World” (Brazier and Mannur 1-2). Nowadays, “diaspora . . . speaks to diverse groups of displaced persons and communities moving across the globe” (Brazier and Mannur 2), which are fictionally represented in a variety of contemporary literary works, such as the novel under analysis in the dissertation.

James Clifford, one of the most important theorists of diaspora, in his essay *Diasporas*, reviews some of the characteristics listed originally by William Safran of the “ideal diaspora.” Clifford states that, according to Safran, these characteristics are: “a history of dispersal, myths/memories of the homeland, alienation in the host (bad host?) country, desire for eventual return, ongoing support of the homeland, and a collective identity importantly defined by this relationship” (218). Although this would be a very good frame for classifying which groups are diasporic, since it presents some clear-cut features, Clifford is suspicious of such a model, since some diasporic groups may not necessarily display all these features and still be considered diasporic.

According to Clifford,

We should be wary of constructing our working definition of a term like *diaspora* by recourse to an ‘ideal type’, with the consequence that groups become identified as more or less diasporic, having only two, or three, or four of the basic six features . . . Moreover at different times in their history, societies may wax and wane in diasporism, depending on changing possibilities – obstacles, openings, antagonisms, and connections – in their host countries and transnationally. (219)

Although the characteristics presented by Safran are helpful when identifying and defining diasporic groups, they should be viewed only as common traits of diasporic groups, which may not necessarily be always present. In *West of the Jordan*, the portrayed diasporic community, which has Hala, Soraya and Khadija as its main representatives, surely shares a history of dispersal and a collective identity (although it is manifested through different ways in each of the characters), but the cultivation of memories of the homeland and a desire of return, for instance, are definitely not present in all of the characters, as this dissertation will show. Regarding the issue of return, Avtar Brah highlights exactly this aspect of diaspora: not all of them are embedded in the idea of return. By stating that “a homing desire is not the same thing as a desire for a homeland”, Brah suggests that “not all diasporas sustain an ideology of ‘return’” (180).

Brazier and Mannur mention some aspects of this heterogeneity that can be found in diasporic processes. The authors rely on the Janus metaphor, which is usually used in order to represent the relation between diasporic subjects and their homelands, with the purpose of showing that it is not always appropriate for all diasporic groups. Brazier and Mannur briefly describe the metaphor, by stating: “Janus, the figure from the Greek pantheon whose gaze is simultaneously directed both forward and backward, suggests a certain temporality; the figure at once looks to the future and the past” (9). Although the “split vision” of diasporic subjects, which makes them plan their future in the host countries without losing the connection with their roots, may be present, it is not always like that. Brazier and Mannur especially call attention to those people who do not want to look back, because of political or economic reasons, and the younger people, members of second generation of immigrants, who, many times, do not have meaningful memories and connections to their homelands (9). In *West of the Jordan*, the Janus metaphor would be appropriate when describing Hala’s relationship with her

homeland, since she wants to establish a life in the United States without losing track of her roots in Jordan, but it certainly does not appropriately represent Soraya and Khadija, since these characters do not have strong connections to Palestine, as it will be fully explored further in this dissertation.

Therefore, Clifford, Braziel and Mannur admit this heterogeneous character of diasporic experiences and all of them highlight that diaspora cannot be seen neither as something entirely positive or entirely negative. Braziel and Mannur call attention to the fact that, although the term “diaspora” literally and historically has a negative connotation, it carries a heavy positive meaning in its etymological sense. According to them, the term

literally (and on an historical level, negatively) denotes communities of people dislocated from their native homelands through migration, immigration, or exile as a consequence of colonial expansion, but etymologically suggests the (more positive) fertility of dispersion, dissemination, and the scattering of seeds. (4)

Clifford also recognizes the negative and positive aspects of diaspora and he is more specific about them. Clifford associates the negativity of diaspora with the discrimination and exclusion to which diasporic subjects are often submitted, while the more positive aspect is related to a stronger identification of these subjects with people from other parts of the world.

As Clifford states, diasporic subjects seem to be more global and, therefore, they have more possibilities of gathering forces. According to him,

Diaspora consciousness is constituted both negatively and positively. It is constituted negatively by experiences of discrimination and exclusion. The barriers facing racialized sojourners are often reinforced by

socioeconomic constraints. . . . Diaspora consciousness is produced positively through identification with world historical cultural/political forces. The process may not be as much about being African . . . or wherever one has settled, differently. It is also about feeling global. (224-25)

Thus, both Clifford and Braziel and Mannur assume that diasporic processes are composed by losses and gains, which can be seen in *West of the Jordan*. In the novel, the characters lose part of their connection with their homelands, and their bonds with some of the traditions may be weakened at times, but they also gain new connections with their host cultures, besides having the possibility of recreating their relations with the traditions of their own cultures.

The ways in which diasporic subjects recreate these traditions and deal with both the native culture and the host culture are, accordingly to Braziel and Mannur, different from one another. The authors argue that “diasporic subjects are marked by hybridity and heterogeneity – cultural, linguistic, ethnic, national – and these subjects are defined by a traversal of the boundaries demarcating nation and diaspora” (5). Therefore, when analyzing diasporic individuals and contexts, it needs to be accounted that their experiences are always diverse, and, even within a same diasporic group, one which shares the same language and background, there are distinct experiences.

This aspect of multiplicity within diaspora is especially emphasized by Brah, who proposes a concept of diaspora “embedded within a multi-axial understanding of power, one that problematises the notion of ‘minority/majority’” (189). This is highly grounded on the idea of positionality, which means that depending on the context and on the groups that are currently interacting, the position occupied by the subjects will

vary. Thus, “a group constituted as a ‘minority’ along one dimension of differentiation may be constructed as a ‘majority’ along another” (189).

Another fundamental theorist when dealing with diaspora is Stuart Hall. In the essay “Cultural Identity and Diaspora”, Hall, although writing about cinema and the Caribbean context, sheds light on important issues that are common to multiple ethnic backgrounds and to multiple media of enunciation – not only cinema, but also literature, and even the everyday circumstances and practices – in which individuals position themselves. He argues that “identity” is a production that is always in process and is never stable, and he points out two different concepts for “cultural identity”. (234)

The first concept about which he writes is related to the idea of an ethnic group sharing many similarities, such as their common diasporic experiences, and cultural codes and ways of thinking. As Hall states, this conception of cultural identity “provides us, as ‘one people’, with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history” (234). This idea is related to essentialist views which seek for a common core that invariably, and supposedly, all individuals share, and although Hall focuses more on the positive contributions of this idea – such as the creation of organized movements as the anti-racist – theorists that see cultural identity this way are neglecting the existence of many and important differences between individuals who share the same cultural background.

Recognizing the need of understanding the diasporic experience through less superficial lenses, Hall disserts about the second concept of cultural identity. According to him, this position admits the presence of similarities shared by a group, but it goes beyond that, focusing on the changes that individuals undergo, which are not fixed only in a common past, but “constitute ‘what we really are’, or rather – since history has intervened – ‘what we have become’. We cannot speak for very long, with any

exactness, about ‘one experience, one identity’ without acknowledging its other side – the ruptures and discontinuities which constitute the Caribbean’s ‘uniqueness’” (236). The ‘Caribbean uniqueness’ about which he writes can be easily substituted with other groups, such as the Arab, as it is the case here, to show that one cannot write about an “Arabness” and cannot consider that all Arab people experience the same identity.

These two different concepts of cultural identity that Hall proposes are very useful for the understanding of how the women characters experience the diaspora in Halaby’s *West of the Jordan*. The first concept is an example of something that does not take place in the novel, since the relationships that the narrator-characters have with their Arab and diasporic condition are much more highlighted by their differences than by their similarities. The second concept, on the other hand, is exactly related to what happens in the novel: the experience of diaspora is marked by what the characters *become*, rather than by what the characters *are*. The ways in which they construct their experiences are more marked by different positions than by anything else, although it should be stated that, as Hall puts it, all these different positions are grounded on the past (236), that is, the construction of one’s identity is influenced by the ways that each individual relates and re-reads the past common experiences.

After discussing some theories about diaspora, it is also important to investigate some key critical concepts regarding the intersections between diaspora and gender. This bridge between them is built by Susan Stanford Friedman as she analyzes how they interact and influence each other. To do so, Friedman proposes, in the book *Mappings*, what she calls a “new geography of identity”, which “figures identity as a historically embedded site, a positionality, a location, a standpoint, a terrain, an intersection, a network, a crosswords of multiply situated knowledges” (19). Friedman, then, sees identity through multiple lenses, and, more importantly, she recognizes that it is a



matter of one positioning and locating oneself in relation to several different cultural formations, such as race, gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality and so forth. For instance, when analyzing the characters' identities in *West of the Jordan*, it needs to be acknowledged that their identities are not grounded on the fact that they are Arab-American only – although this might be the most evident and striking aspect – but also on their being upper-class Arab women living in the United States.

Regarding these intersections, Friedman adds that “the self is not singular, it is multiple. The location it occupies contains many positions within it, each of which may well depend on its interaction with the others for its particular inflection . . . the constituents of identity emerge from a succession of categories” (21). As Friedman states, interaction is a key factor for the way subjects position themselves. Thus, in this dissertation, I intend to analyze the characters, not in isolation, but rather in relation to the other constituents of the plot, that is, the situations lived by them, their environment, and also the other characters.

Ella Shohat also works with the idea of relationality and interaction, but her discussion is extended to the idea of a relational feminism. According to her, this understanding “assumes a nonfinalized and conjunctural definition of feminism as a polysemic site of contradictory positionalities” (68). About the need to establish a polysemic feminism, Shohat shows her concern about not homogenizing some groups. She states that

any dialogue about the fictive unity called “Middle Eastern women” or “Latin American gays/lesbians” – especially one that is taking place within a transnational framework – has to begin from the premise that genders, sexualities, races, classes, nations, and even continents exist not

as hermetically sealed entities but rather as part of a permeable interwoven relationality. (68)

Therefore, the analysis developed in this dissertation assumes the fact that the category of “Middle Eastern women” is a strategic tool only, and, as a consequence the heterogeneity underlying the characters being analyzed here is of great importance. The diasporic women characters of *West of the Jordan* will be approached in light of their different traits and aspects so as to avoid a reductionist framework.

The idea of relationality proposed both by Friedman and Shohat are groundbreaking in the sense that they prevent criticism from seeing gender as the determinant of identity and as the first principle for defining it, as gynesis and gynocriticism tend to see; instead, gender is seen as one more of the many aspects that constitute a fluid identity. For Friedman, the new geography of identity has a strong influence on narrative studies. In relation to characters, she poses that they “occupy multiple and shifting positions in relation to each other and to different systems of power relations,” and “unlike gynocriticism and gynesis, the new geography of identity encourages interactional analysis of different constituents of identity, no one privileged over the other” (28). It is clear, then, that not only does the study of gender go well with diaspora studies, it is also necessary for a more complete analysis of diasporic individuals, and for the analysis of diasporic women characters, in narrative studies.

Friedman, in the article “The ‘New Migration’: Clashes, Connections and Diasporic Women’s Writing”, writes about the relevance of gender for a more thorough understanding of the contemporary diasporic configurations and states that “gender – particularly the experience of women – is the flashpoint of complexity, exploding at every step reductionist readings of the ‘new migration’” (23). This importance of gender to the understanding of diaspora lies in some happenings and portrayals of the female

figure that are often represented in contemporary women's writing. The portrayal of the female body in the new land and its reception among the indigenous' people together with the treatment directed to it, and the dismantlement of clichés involving binaries are examples of the ways in which gender can help to illuminate diaspora issues.

Friedman also explains that, in some situations, women are still victims of violence against their bodies and this violence is a great component of all the conflicts involved in diaspora matters, which makes the understanding of gender conflicts fundamental to the understanding of diaspora conflicts themselves:

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

What is being suggested by Friedman is that the feminist claims, related, for instance, to the end of violence against women, are in fact connected to dislocation, since the diasporic experiences suffer influence of, but also influence gender relations.

Diasporic experiences influence gender relations in the sense that, when in a new place, women need to recreate their positioning and to reconsider and negotiate what it means to be a woman in a new and sometimes completely different place, reconfiguring the female experiences, which would not happen if they lived their entire lives in the same place. Moreover, some gender conditions that have always existed and were not necessarily generated by dislocation – such as the violence women suffer in their

homelands – also contribute to the shaping of women’s experience in the new land, since they carry their gender-marked bodies and experiences with them.

Floya Anthias also highlights the importance of considering gender when analyzing the condition of diasporic subjects, because, according to her, women occupy a unique position within the diasporic process. This uniqueness is mainly due to the role of reproducers and transmitters of cultural traditions, which has fallen upon women, as she states:

With regard to gender, the role of men and women in the process of accommodation and syncretism may be different. Women are the transmitters and reproducers of ethnic and national ideologies and central in the transmission of cultural rules (Anthias and Yuval Davis 1989). At the same time they may have a different relation to the nation or ethnic group since they are not represented by it and are generally in a subordinate relation to hegemonic men who are also classed (Kandiyoti 1991, Walby 1994, Anthias 1992a). Women may be empowered by retaining home traditions but they may also be quick to abandon them when they are no longer strategies of survival (Anthias 1992a, Bhachu 1988). (571)

It is interesting to notice that merely assuming the role of transmitters of cultural values does not guarantee that such values and traditions will be safely kept by women, since their power of rejecting them is as great as of maintaining them. The key role of women in diaspora, thus, might be less derived from their ability to retain traditions than to their power of deciding what to do with these traditions, which makes them defining elements to a whole ethnic group. In *West of the Jordan*, this power of the women characters cannot be really measured, since readers do not have access to a broader

spectrum of their family relationships, but their movements of embracing cultural values at times, and rejecting them, at others, as “strategies of survival”, as stated by Anthias, become perfectly clear in the novel.

Furthermore, Anthias remarks that women cultivate two different kinds of gender relations: one related to their ethnic group and the other related to their host group. As she states: “What is clear is that they experience two sets of gender relations or patriarchal relations, those of their own classed and gendered group and those of the main ethnic group represented in the state” (571). Therefore, this dissertation will attempt to cover the two sets of gender relations experienced by the women characters, since this provides a more complete and thorough analysis of gender and diaspora. Assessing the two sets of gender relations is relevant because it shows the multiple facets of gender relations that can be lived by diasporic women, since, as this dissertation will show, some women characters witness changing gender relations as they go back and forth the two sides of the hyphen: some of them, Hala and Soraya, are much empowered by the new gender relations found in the host countries, while Khadija, although experiencing different gender relations, cannot be freed from the limitations and constraints imposed on her.

Besides Friedman, Shohat and Anthias, another theoretician of diaspora who recognizes the importance of taking gender into account is Clifford. Clifford admits that “diasporic experiences are always gendered. But there is a tendency for theoretical accounts of diasporas and diaspora cultures to hide this fact, to talk of travel and displacement in unmarked ways, thus normalizing male experiences” (226). To consider that diasporas are gendered means to embrace the fact that women have unique roles within diaspora and also that their diasporic experiences, more than those of men, are constantly framed by gender relations – both in the host culture and their culture of

origin, as it was previously stated. Clifford elaborates on the importance of gender for diaspora studies by arguing:

Women's experiences are particularly revealing. Do diaspora experiences reinforce or loosen gender subordination? On the one hand, maintaining connections with homelands, with kinship networks, and with religious and cultural traditions may renew patriarchal structures. On the other, new roles and demands, new political spaces, are opened by diaspora interactions . . . they [women] may find their new diaspora predicaments conducive to a positive renegotiation of gender relations. (227)

Thus, Clifford's arguments, similarly to Anthias's, highlight the two possible configurations of women's experiences in diaspora: rules and traditions may be enforced, but negotiations and new alternatives can also be created. However, it is important to state that, even though such possibilities seem to be contradictory and to exclude each other, they may coexist, since women's journeys might be, at times, marked by empowerment, and, at other times, marked by oppression. In *West of the Jordan*, each character is mainly marked by one possibility, but all of them end up experiencing different moments of oppression and empowerment, alternately.

By reading what has been suggested by Clifford, it might seem, at first, that he exclusively associates women's connections with their homelands with patriarchal rules and submission, while the "new" culture is related to openings and some degree of freedom. However, Clifford wisely complements his arguments by stating that the proximity with their homelands may also be a source of empowerment:

Life for women in diasporic situations can be doubly painful – struggling with the material and spiritual insecurities of exile, with the demands of family and work, and with the claims of old and new patriarchies.

Despite these hardships, they may refuse the option of return when it presents itself, especially when the terms are dictated by men. At the same time, women in diaspora remain attached to, and empowered by, a 'home' culture and tradition – selectively. (227)

Therefore, Clifford ponders that moving away from home traditions does not necessarily mean moving away from patriarchy, since it can also be found in the gender relations of the new country, although it might present itself differently. Moreover, he admits that staying connected to home tradition can also be empowering and significant to women's experiences. Thus, the importance of Clifford's ideas regarding gender and diaspora lies in the fact that he considers that there are no definite arrangements and consequences surrounding women's movements, since they constantly revolve around pain and empowerment.

Regarding the necessity of not homogenizing diasporic women and their experiences, Shohat also claims that one needs to be careful about not essentializing them and grouping all women as if they were equal to each other. Shohat argues:

Our challenge, I think, is precisely to avoid a facile additive operation of merely piling up increasingly differentiated groups of women from different regions and ethnicities – all of whom are projected as presumably forming a coherent yet easily demarcated entity. In contrast, the notion of a relational feminism goes beyond a mere description of the many cultures from which feminisms emerge; it transcends an additive approach, which simply has women of the globe neatly neighbored and stocked, paraded in a United Nations – style "Family of Nations" pageant where each ethnically marked feminist speaks in her turn, dressed in national costume. To map histories of women . . . we must place them in

dialogical relation within, between, and among cultures, ethnicities, and nations. (68-69)

The prepositions Shohat uses are very significant for the kind of relation she proposes for the dialogue between the two areas, since it is not enough to study women from different ethnicities separately, but rather, different cultures should be analyzed in an intertwined way, really *within, between, and among* each other, and not “each ethnically marked feminist speaking in her turn, dressed in national costume” (2). One of the challenges for multicultural feminism, then, is to make feminists who speak on behalf of different ethnicities to talk and to relate to each other, which would prevent the creation of isolated feminisms. Therefore, Shohat, by being concerned with the ways in which multicultural feminism operates, not only recognizes the importance of linking gender and ethnicity, but she is also attentive to how this should happen.

For Shohat, another challenge for multicultural feminism, or what she calls “the movement of feminist ideas across borders” (7) or even “transnational feminism” (10), is related to essentializing versus non-essentializing notions. According to her, this project needs be articulated “in relation to the issue of gender essentialism, on the one hand, and cultural essentialism, on the other” (10). More than having to struggle against a double essentialism, multicultural feminism needs to know which portions of these essentialisms cannot be simply rejected, since they are important, for instance, in the pursuit of the so-called “affirmative action”, whose bases are present in essentializing notions.

Thus, the challenge, according to Shohat, lies on the fact that “theory deconstructs totalizing myths while activism has to nourish them” (10). For instance, in regard to Arab women in the United States, multicultural feminists’ challenge is to find a balance between combating stereotypes related to both being Arab and being an Arab



woman, and nurturing essential notions such as “Arab women are sometimes the victims of patriarchy” in order to find agency to fight against this patriarchy, which, in the United States, can be even worse, since it might come from men within the Arab community and also from the American gaze that fills the Arab women with expectations of exoticism and servitude.

The author and critic Susan Muaddi Darraj, who is best known for being the editor of *Food for Our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists* (1994), an anthology about Arab-American feminism, agrees with Shohat on the fact that Arab-American feminism still has many challenges to face. The main problem, according to Darraj, is that “despite recent interest in the Middle East, following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, the West has not made significant progress in its understanding of either Arab culture or of the role of women in Arab society and within the Arab community in America” (159). The image of the Arab woman is, most of the times, reduced to an oppressed veiled woman, and Darraj states that “the ‘Faceless Veiled Woman’ is the Arab-American woman’s version of ‘the Angel in the House’” (164). Darraj makes such approximation between the two models because, according to her, the real potentialities of women were suppressed by the Victorian model of domestic women, and, similarly, the model of the Faceless Veiled Woman is a barrier for Arab women’s full affirmation and development. The author elaborates an explanation for the existence of such limiting and persistent stereotypes:

Arab and Muslim women continue to be used as a means of justifying the “spreading of liberty” doctrine across the Middle East. At a time when East and West are allegedly at odds, Arabs in America – and especially Arab women – have become key players and, too frequently, pawns. In fact, the image of the oppressed, silenced Arab woman is frequently used

by some as proof of the barbarity of Arab culture, and even to justify the West's foreign policy toward the East. (159)

Therefore, one should not look at this issue naively, since behind supposedly true images there are political motivations, and, instead of "saving" Arab women, West's policy is, in fact, silencing them even more, since it speaks on behalf of them, preventing them from giving their account of their own situations.

Thus, Arab-American women face two different challenges: affirming themselves within their own community and family, and also speaking out to this greater sphere, which is the Western community, mainly the American, in their case. Darraj recognizes this double struggle that Arab-American women need to face, and she divides this predicament into two spheres: the personal and the political. According to her, the personal is related to the ways they are portrayed within the Arab community, while the political corresponds to the ways in which the American society and government regard them (160). As a consequence, Darraj argues, "Arab American women face personal challenges within their own communities regarding education, sexuality, work, and marriage. At the same time, they face overtly political obstacles from the larger American community" (160). Therefore, it is undeniable that there are problems regarding the situation of women within the Arab community, but one cannot forget that these problems are extensive to the American community as well. As Darraj states, "grappling with the patriarchal attitudes and customs of Arab culture, which are carried over and transmitted by immigrant parents and grandparents, is only one of the challenges facing Arab American women today" (161).

As a possible solution to these problems, Darraj suggests that Arab-American women must attempt to deconstruct the stereotyped images that are perpetuated in the West, and she points out that this is already happening:

Arab American women must find a way to articulate the hypocrisy of the Western notion of Arab women and translate it back to Western culture, to uproot the deeply implanted stereotype of the Faceless Veiled Woman. This articulation is happening, and it is most exciting to see it in the growing body of literature by Arab American women. (165-66)

Therefore, it is interesting to notice that literature, which is sometimes seen as detached from the social reality, is one of the major contributors to the deconstruction of stereotypes regarding Arab-American women. Darraj exemplifies how literature can be helpful, by mentioning that some poems written by Arab-American writers, for instance, might be “a reminder of the blatant hypocrisy of viewing Arabs and Muslim women as victims of a backwards culture while forgetting the way one’s own culture often exploits women”. (166) However, this is only one way through which literature can be in the service of Arab-American feminism. Laila Halaby’s *West of the Jordan*, for instance, brings stories of empowerment and renegotiations, which can be very inspiring for Arab-American women and for other groups of women as well. Moreover, it undermines stereotypes, giving readers – many of them, Western ones – an insider’s account of the situation of these women, denouncing the painful experiences they undergo in the domestic sphere and in the Arab community and family, but also within the larger scope of the American community.

Besides these aspects of Halaby’s work, something that also makes it worthy of investigation is the portrayal of the heterogeneity of Arab-American and Arab women. If, as it has been discussed on this dissertation, one of the most important ways of deconstructing stereotypes is through the awareness that women, and Arab women, are not all the same, the novel does a magnificent job of presenting the multiple facets of the characters. Darraj emphasizes the importance of considering this multiplicity, since

Arab-American women, as she argues, may come from extremely distinct backgrounds, and undergo totally diverse experiences. The critic states:

What has become clear is that Arab American women span a variety of countries of origin, socio-economic classes, and religious affiliations and attitudes . . . The great variety one finds among women in the Arab American community mimics that of other ethnic-American communities: Latinas, Africans, Asians, and Southeast Asians. In terms of dealing with their community and its more patriarchal elements, Arab Americans also share the same feminist concerns as other ethnic American women: the culture clash often experienced by those born to immigrant parents; the burden of bearing the native culture on one's shoulders, manifested in such ways as feeling pressure to marry someone from the "homeland"; and seeking an education and establishing a career. These challenges are faced by Arab American women at all levels of intensity. While some Arab American women live closely sheltered, restricted lives, others have a degree of freedom and independence that would surpass that of American feminists and surprise them as well.

(167)

Thus, before making considerations based on a supposedly homogeneous group, that of the Arab-American women, one should carefully ponder that, even though some worries might be similar, since they are all diasporic subjects, and, therefore, share some concerns, they come from different backgrounds and have distinct beliefs. The most basic and generalized stereotypes do not hold true for all Arab-American women and one should be ready to analyze some of these women as subjects who were capable to achieve a degree of liberation and empowerment.

In conclusion, this dissertation intends to analyze *West of the Jordan's* characters based on these considerations, and mainly based on the idea of heterogeneity of Arab-American women. As Darraj states, Arab-American women should “present not the monolithic image of Arab women that everyone seems to want – that seems convenient – but the collage of Arab American women’s faces, voices, and perspectives to America and the world” (166-67). This is exactly what Halaby does in her novel, and this dissertation intends to contribute with her project by analyzing the multiplicity of diasporic women’s experiences contained in it, so as not to let the various possibilities presented by Arab-American women be reduced to the Faceless Veiled woman.

## 1. Scary is What is Happening: Khadija and Her Sense of Loss and Displacement

The first character that is going to be analyzed in this dissertation helps to shed light on issues related to second generation immigrants. Khadija is the daughter of Shahira, Huda's sister, and of a violent father, whom she calls Baba. She has five siblings, and the two older girls, Mina and Monia, are the daughters of her mother's first marriage. Khadija was born in California and has never been to Palestine, her parents' homeland, and she expresses no wish of going there, not even for a visit. However, the fact that she does not show much interest in her Arab origins does not mean that she is strongly attached to the United States either, since she does not feel comfortable with many aspects of the American culture and lifestyle. Therefore, I will analyze how Khadija behaves being in-between two cultures with which she does not feel any strong identification. Issues of gender will be brought up along with diaspora issues, because they help to shed light on Khadija's identity and behavior, specifically, and paradigmatically on the second-generation Arab immigrants in the United States, in general.

Right at the beginning of Khadija's narration, we see the girl digressing about her name. First, she shows the readers the origins of it, explaining that "in Islam, Khadija was the Prophet Muhammad's wife. She was much older than he was and had a lot of money. He was said to have loved her very much" (36). Khadija highlights the positive aspects of her name, emphasizing the richness and the love that were present in the original Khadija's life. However, right after this, Khadija continues talking about her name by saying: "In America my name sounds like someone throwing up or falling off a bicycle. If they can get the first part of it right, the 'Kha' part, it comes out like clearing your throat after eating ice cream. Usually they say *Kadeeja*, though, which

sounds clattering clumsy” (36). The abrupt contrast Khadija makes between the beautiful origin of her name and the ungraceful way that Americans have to pronounce it seems almost like someone waking up from a dream and facing a very different and practical reality.

It is as if Khadija were questioning what the usefulness of having a meaningful name is, if, in her everyday life, people are only able to pronounce it so awkwardly that every time they do it, she thinks about bicycle accidents or throat clearings and not about the beloved wife of Prophet Muhammad. Khadija does not see any possibility of someone feeling happy about having been given that name in the United States. She says: “I’m sure the original Khadija was very nice and that’s why the Prophet Muhammad married her and why my father gave me her name, but I’m also sure that if the original Khadija went to school in America that she would hate her name just as much as I do” (36).

Khadija tries to convince herself that the problem is not related to the name itself, let alone to the fact that it is Arabic, but rather to how it is pronounced *in* the United States. She argues that:

It [her name] never comes out my mother’s soft way; *she* makes it sound almost pretty. It’s not like I’m dying to have an American name. I’d just like a different Arabic one. There are so many pretty names: Amani, Hala, Rawda, Mawal, and they all mean such pretty things – wishes, halo, garden, melody – not just the name of a rich old woman. (36)

However, it can be noticed that she does not really like it, since she says that her mother makes her name “sound *almost* pretty,” and not exactly pretty. Also, if at first she associated positive characteristics to the meaning of her name, now she shows that she

would like it to represent something deeper and more poetic than just a “rich old woman.”

Moreover, although she tries to believe that another Arabic name would suit her very well, the name she considers as her favorite one is Western, as she herself admits:

I think Princess Diana is beautiful, and even though Diana is a pretty western [sic] name, I thought I'd like to have it, so I told my friends at school that I was going to change my name to Diana and they should call me that from now on. 'But you don't look like a Diana,' Roberta told me. 'What do I look like then?' 'I don't know. Like a Kadeeja, I guess'. (37)

Khadija chose a Western name probably because she knows that Americans would not pronounce any of the Arabic names exactly as they are supposed to sound. Besides this, by wishing to have a name that is not Arabic, Khadija also wants to feel more integrated into the American community and she wants people not to experience estrangement when pronouncing her name. Moreover, the fact that Khadija asks Roberta what she looks like is very significant, because it seems that she has trouble finding out who she is: if she does not feel like Khadija and is not identified, by the others, with Diana, then, who is she? Consequently, what she asks Roberta can be interpreted as a request for help in searching her own identity.

Therefore, right from the beginning of Khadija's narration in *West of the Jordan*, it is possible to see that she does not feel comfortable with one of the most noticeable and significant symbols of one's cultural identity, which are names. Even if a person does not have facial features that relate her to a specific ethnic group, but has a name that is definitely related to it, people who get to know her name will immediately connect her to this group. Thus, if Khadija had a Western name, there would be a



chance of her passing as a Western girl, not raising reactions that associate her with an unwelcome ethnic group.

Khadija expressing the desire to change her name is, in fact, something very interesting, since it dates back to the beginnings of Arab immigration in the United States. There are reports of immigrants changing their names in the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth, when masses of them arrived in the United States through Ellis Island. It is said that “workers from immigrant-aid societies who helped the new arrivals may have suggested that they change their names to simplify or ‘Americanize’ them. Certainly, immigrants changed their own names after they arrived” (Smith 32). Therefore, changing their names has been a strategy for immigrants to have a greater integration with the American society for more than a hundred years, but Khadija, (even though she does not officially does this and nobody seems to take her wish seriously), in contemporary times, seems to follow the same directions of those earlier immigrants.

Different from this first group, the so-called third-wave of Arab immigration, which “began in 1967 and continues to this day” (Ludescher 94) is concerned about embracing the culture of their homelands – not necessarily rejecting the American culture – and they keep up to date with what happens in the Arab world, usually participating in political discussions and events. As Ludescher argues, this third wave of immigration is characterized by the formation of Arab-American organizations and by the rejection of “negative stereotypes of Arabs in the popular press” (94). Thus, Khadija seems to be out of step with the current tendency of Arab immigration in the United States, but the fact is that diasporic groups present differences among them as often as individuals within the same ethnic group may present.

In fact, many aspects need to be taken into account in the analysis of a subject's positioning towards diaspora, since there are several nuances behind the general considerations that can be formulated. Hall mentions some factors that contribute to the distinctions present in the way diasporic subjects deal with their ethnicity and traditions. According to him, "there is very considerable variation, both of commitment and of practice, between and within different communities – between different nationalities and linguistic groups, within religious faiths, between men and women, and across the generations" ("Conclusion: The Multi-Cultural" 220). The difference regarding generations is extremely meaningful for Khadija, and it is present in the whole novel, as it is going to be discussed in this dissertation.

There is a passage in the novel in which Khadija argues with her mother exactly about the divergences between the two generations. According to Khadija, the fact that many people, including her mother, do not consider her American is extremely disturbing for her. During one of the frequent quarrels that she has with her mother, who "gets really mad" (74), Khadija presents some arguments in order to prove that she is American, and not Arab. She says: "I can't speak Arabic right, I've never even been there, and I don't like all of those dancing parties. I like stories and movies. I can be American and still be your daughter" (74). Here, we can notice that Khadija does not see any connections between the Arab world and herself, because it is a place that she does not even know, and all the information she has about it comes from other people's perceptions of it – people who probably are not part of her generation.

Therefore, the way Khadija sees it, she does not have any connections which are strong enough to make her feel Arab. Braziel and Mannur highlight the necessity of taking the descendant generations of immigrants into account, since their experiences can be completely different from the ones of their parents or grandparents. Braziel and

Mannur pose some questions with which diasporic families have to deal regarding the younger generations. They ask: “How will their memories of the homeland, marked by ambivalence and contradiction, operate? How will they relate to the cultural heritage of their parents? Will they reject aspects of the home country culture? Will they embrace other aspects? What types of alliances will they seek to establish?” (8-9).

These questions, which are fundamental to the understanding of the diasporic subsequent generations, show that younger people will cultivate different relationships both towards the country of origin and the host country. The ambivalent aspect of these people’s memory, pointed out by Braziel and Mannur, is extremely important, since some individuals from the younger generations, such as Khadija, do not have their personal memories about the places of origin, because they were not born there. All the memories to which they have access are constructed by the older generations, and, therefore, the contact that Khadija, for instance, has with the Arab culture is always mediated by her parents and relatives who actually have these memories. Consequently, the way she relates to this culture and the importance that it has in her life is obviously different from the people who have, or who had, a more direct contact with it.

Mary Chamberlain, even though she writes about the case of African-Caribbean communities, highlights the presence of memories in diasporic processes. Chamberlain values both individual and collective memories for people in diaspora, and argues that both of them have an important role. Regarding individual memories, she claims:

Clearly, memories are all unique and personal, each an account of the individual’s life course from childhood to maturity, of the transformations from a . . . village to a migrant in a busy metropolis, and of the fictionalizing process inherent in the construction of a narrative of self. Memories are a key route into revealing and understanding the

processes, adjustments, and negotiations of migrants, of the mobile and liminal worlds they inhabit, of the connections with and the longings for home. (185-86)

Chamberlain, thus, admits that individual memories are essential for each person's construction and understanding of their own diasporic trajectories. Such memories are extremely important because even though diasporic experiences carry common traits, each of them is personal and unique; consequently, individual memories are fundamental strategies of revealing each person's trajectories.

However, Chamberlain also emphasizes the importance of collective memory. According to her, besides the individual characteristics, memories "also contain those all-important traces from an older past, those deeper levels of values, attitudes, and behaviors, clues to a collective memory" (186). This collective memory is what creates coherence and a sense of continuity that can be found in diasporic communities. Regarding this issue, Michael Pollak shows that, at first, memory might be understood as something individual, but he highlights the fact that Maurice Halbwachs, in the 20's and 30's, "had already underlined that memory must also, or mainly, be understood as a collective and social phenomenon, that is, as a phenomenon which is collectively constructed and submitted to fluctuations, transformations, changes" [my translation] (201).<sup>3</sup> This changing aspect of the structure of traditional memory and its understanding as a continuously constructed phenomenon can be immediately related to the diasporic condition itself, which is also something fragmented, collective, fluctuating, and in permanent transformation.

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<sup>3</sup> "já havia sublinhado que a memória deve ser entendida também, ou sobretudo, como um fenômeno coletivo e social, ou seja, como um fenômeno construído coletivamente e submetido a flutuações, transformações, mudanças" (201).

Still regarding collective memory, Pollak mentions the events indirectly experienced. According to him,

these are events in which the subject has not always participated, but, in the imaginary, they acquired such a projection that, in the end, it is almost impossible for one to know if one has participated in it or not. If we go further, along with these events indirectly experienced are the events which are not situated within the time-space of a person or group.  
(201)<sup>4</sup>

The problem is that Khadija obviously does not have any individual memories about Palestine and her family who stayed there, and the collective memory, which is accessible to people who have not actually experienced the events, as Pollak states, is not appealing enough for her. Although collective memory is present in Khadija's life, since, as Chamberlain argues, it contains traces of older attitudes, values, and behaviors, and thus the character unavoidably has contact with it, she cannot notice its presence. Collective memories are responsible for maintaining the coherence and continuity of a diasporic community (Chamberlain 185), and if Khadija does not feel almost any sense of belonging to the Arab community, then, it is impossible for her to relate to these memories.

Braziel and Mannur insist on the necessity of considering the multiple factors that will probably make the younger generations of diasporic people relate to their cultures in particular ways – which may not always be accepted by the older generations. They write, for instance, about the fact that young people may not want to

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<sup>4</sup> “são acontecimentos dos quais a pessoa nem sempre participou, mas que, no imaginário, tomaram tamanho relevo que, no fim das contas, é quase impossível que ela consiga saber se participou ou não. Se formos mais longe, a esses acontecimentos vividos por tabela vêm se juntar todos os eventos que não se situam dentro do espaço-tempo de uma pessoa ou de um grupo” (201).

look back, as their parents many times want them to do, simply because when they look back, they do not have the same view of their parents. Braziel and Mannur ask:

What happens when one cannot or does not want to look back . . . ? What happens when future generations do not know how to look back, or as Karin-Aguilar San Juan notes, if looking back means looking back to a place *within* the United States where they spent their childhood and not to some primordial beginning in the home country? (9)

A possible solution for these problems, according to Braziel and Mannur, is to consider diaspora in terms other than exclusively the nostalgic ones, meaning that diaspora is not exclusively about looking back and returning to an original place, and also to analyze the issue “in the light of the fact that hybridity, heterogeneity and multiplicity characterize the situation of many diasporic communities and individuals.” (9). Therefore, one should not expect diasporic experiences to be homogeneous and predictable, and in order to analyze these “problematic dynamics, diaspora studies will need to move beyond theorizing how diasporic identities are constructed and consolidated, and must ask, how are these diasporic identities practiced, lived, and experienced?” (9). Thus, according to Brazil and Mannur, it is only through the daily experiences of diaspora that its heterogeneity and the way it operates can become clear.

Through Khadija’s experiences, it is possible to see that being a hyphenated subject seems to be a burden for her sometimes. She is always trying to make people see that she is American, because in her view she has more than enough reasons to be considered an American girl. She appears to be tired of frequently facing situations in which people express their opinion about her being a foreign girl, and not American. She mentions, for instance, that this happens at school more often than not, and she specifically talks about Mr. Napolitano, her social studies’ teacher: “He expects me to

know more than the other kids because my parents are not American, though there are lots of other kids in the class who aren't American themselves. I want to scream at him that I am just as American as anyone here" (74). This quotation is full of meaningful aspects regarding Khadija's diasporic condition.

First of all, it is interesting to think about possible explanations for the fact that Khadija is expected to know more than the other students. One explanation may lie on the fact that, because Khadija is a hyphenated American, she has to face more difficulties than her non-diasporic classmates, and therefore, she is viewed as already being in disadvantage in relation to the others. Consequently, she is supposed to study more in order to try to diminish this difference between her and her non-hyphenated classmates. Besides, since Social Studies is a subject that involves the basic knowledge of History and Geography, mainly, the second explanation may be related to the fact that Mr. Napolitano assumes that Khadija knows more about these topics than her classmates do, because she is supposedly more involved in cultural issues and, thus, more aware of them than the other children.

Although these may be the possible reasons of Mr. Napolitano's expectations towards Khadija, it is clear that being the child of parents who are not US-born does not mean she should know more than her classmates, as he thinks. Besides this careless assumption, Mr. Napolitano demonstrates another misconception when he implies that Khadija is not American. Since he is a Social Studies teacher, Mr. Napolitano is expected to be aware of cultural and political issues, and the belief that a child of immigrants is less American than the others is a serious mistake, especially coming from him. Moreover, the teacher's last name, "Napolitano", hints at a non-American ancestry, implying that he is most probably an Italian-American. Therefore, this episode shows that even the people who are supposed to have a broader understanding of the

situation of immigrants and their offspring in the United States, such as Social Studies teachers and even the descendants of immigrants themselves, often express prejudicial and misunderstanding views towards diasporic individuals, making it explicit that they still need to struggle in order to affirm themselves as people who are as Americans as any others.

Regarding Khadija's view of her own nationality, what is problematic about it is that she does not seem to accept that she can be both American and Arab, and thus, she wants to state that she is American only. In one of the arguments she has with her mother, Khadija tells her: "*You* are Palestinian. I am American" (74), to which she replies: "No! No daughter of mine is American" (74). Here, it is possible to notice both the resistance of Khadija's mother to accept that she is American and Khadija's resistance to identify herself as being Palestinian. Therefore, mother and daughter are trapped in classifications that in their views are mutually exclusive, and they are not able to see that, instead, these two conditions can contribute and enrich each other.

The critic Rajagopalan Radhakrishnan, in his collection of essays about diasporic locations and diasporic subjectivity, writes about the conflict between different generations of immigrants. According to him, the generation gap is already unavoidable between parents and children, but in the case of immigrants the problem is more intense (206), and he sheds light on the unsettled points that exist between different generations within diaspora:

If the formulaic justification of parental wisdom is that the parent 'has been there before', the formula does not apply here . . . The tensions between the old and new homes create the problem of divided allegiances that the two generations experience differently. The very organicity of family and the community, displaced by travel and relocation, must be



renegotiated and redefined. The two generations have different starting points and different givens. (206)

Through Radhakrishnan's statements, it is possible to see that the biggest problem involving different generations is related to the distinct points of view and experiences that they cultivate. As he says, if part of the parents' wisdom is derived from shared experiences with their children, in the case of diasporic families the absence of common grounds threatens the parents' authority – since parents' wisdom and authority are intimately related – and disrupts everyone's positions in the family, along with their behaviors and points of view. The absence of common grounds between parents and children can be perceived in several dimensions of their lives: when they look back, they see different images and have distinct memories; the relations of affect they cultivate towards both the homeland and the host country are diverse; and what they think it is worth losing and gaining in the diasporic processes may also vary significantly.

As a way of making the two generations understand each other better and find a balance between their differences, Radhakrishnan suggests that parents and children learn how to put themselves in the place of the others, because empathy, according to him, can be extremely helpful in these situations. He affirms:

The older generation cannot afford to invoke India in an authoritarian mode to resolve problems in the diaspora, and the young generation would be ill advised to indulge in a spree of forgetfulness about 'where they come from.' It is vital that the two generations empathize and desire to understand and appreciate patterns of experience not their own. (206)

Although Radhakrishnan's words refer specifically to the case of India, they apply as well to the situation of several other countries involved in diaspora. It is interesting to

notice that the critic mentions the two most common reactions that parents and children usually have. First-generation immigrants tend, in general, to idealize their homelands and, consequently, they try to impose the presence and the importance of these places to their children, even if, for them, the host countries many times are more significant than the places of origin.

As a response to these impositions attempted by their parents, second-generation immigrants are prone to confront the forced presence of their parents' homelands and traditions by vigorously rejecting everything that is related to the places of origin and trying to embrace and to connect themselves to the host country and culture as much as they can. In fact, this is what happens with Khadija, in the novel. Neither the girl nor her parents are willing to make concessions and they stand on virtually opposite sides: her parents – mainly her father – keep lamenting about their being far away from Palestine, and they insist that Khadija cultivates bonds to this place only and not to America, while she completely closes herself to everything that is related to Palestine and strongly advocates in favor of her American identity.

In one of the quarrels Khadija has with her mother, she justifies her lack of connections with the Arab world by saying, for instance, that she likes stories and movies (74). What Khadija does not seem to know, however, is that, in this sense, the Arab culture would be very appropriate for her, since Arab peoples have a strong tradition of storytelling, as we can see in all her cousins, and especially through Mawal. Therefore, Khadija's sense of disconnectedness with the Arab culture perhaps does not come from her not liking it, but rather, from her not effectively knowing it.

Regarding this knowledge that Khadija seems to lack, Radhakrishnan points out an important distinction that needs to be made: the distinction between “*information about and knowledge*” of the place of origin and “*an emotional investment*” in this place

(206). According to him, “what can be shared cognitively between the two generations is the former” (206). This makes great sense in the analysis of Khadija, since it is completely unrealistic to expect that she will be emotionally affected by Palestine to the same extent that her parents are affected. What is problematic in her case is that she does not even seem to have enough information about Palestine, making it almost impossible for her to have with Palestine the bonds that her parents wish her to cultivate, since she does not have neither emotional attachments nor knowledge about the place.

Besides Khadija’s issues with her name and her cultural affiliation, there is another passage in the book which shows that she feels uncomfortable and confused in having to deal with both the Arab and the American culture. Patricia, or Patsy, and Khadija become friends at school, and the latter is apprehensive about approximating Patsy and her family, because since these two cultures are very different from each other, she is afraid of the estrangements that can result from this encounter, and she is especially afraid of Patsy not liking her family and their habits.

The problem is that Khadija’s mother insists on her bringing Patsy to their house, because the girls have been friends for three weeks and none of the family members have met her yet. Shahira suspects that Khadija is ashamed of her family, and, in fact, the girl thinks she has enough reasons to feel this way: “‘You shamed?’ she asked me in English, which made me feel pretty bad because it’s sort of true. It’s not that I’m ashamed, but there are things that an American wouldn’t understand, like my mother’s language or my father’s yelling” (114). It is important to notice that Khadija is worried about Patsy not liking the Arab culture, and not about her family not liking the American girl, which shows that, similarly to the episode involving her name, Khadija is concerned about pleasing the Americans, in an effort to be accepted. Also, the way

Khadija sees it, Americans are incapable of understanding her culture and it is not their task to do so; therefore, she is the one who needs to adapt her positioning in order to fit their culture, and not the other way around.

Despite not liking the idea of having her friend Patsy over for dinner, Khadija finally accepts her mother's request and invites her friend to go to her house, hoping that her mother prepares an American dinner, because she does not think "Patsy and her blond hair will like our food too much" (114). Everything runs smoothly during the dinner, but Khadija remains worried about the impression her family would make on Patsy. About the *musakhan*, a very popular and typical Palestinian dish, which her mother cooked, Khadija says: "Patsy even liked the *musakhan*, though she didn't eat that much, which is probably good because all of the olive oil and onions would give her a stomachache and then she'd hate me" (150). Therefore, we can see that Khadija is concerned about being accepted by her friend, which may explain why she often seems to be turning her back to the Arab culture, since she is afraid that the cultural shock experienced by her friends could scare them.

After this episode, it is Khadija who goes to Patsy's house, and there she gets in contact with a typical American family, meeting a father who remains glued to the television and barely talks to his family, children who eat fried chicken every day, and a boy who is named after the rock singer Mick Jagger. Although Khadija pays attention to all of these aspects, she seems to be used to this configuration of the American families, different from her mother, who gets shocked when Khadija tells her that Patsy's brother is named after a rock singer. According to Shahira, "'This is the problem with America! Instead of naming their children after family or prophets or heroes, they name them after rock stars. Who would believe such a thing?'" (151). The cultural differences between the Arab and the American families are still huge for Shahira, who has

difficulties in understanding their way of life; moreover, she wants to establish, very clearly, the differences between the two cultures, separating what is typical of their culture only from what is typical of the American culture.

In fact, the theorist Susan Friedman argues that individuals from all cultures create strategies in order to establish the limits between their culture and the other ones. According to her, “cultures tend to erect boundaries between themselves and other cultures, defensively defining their own identity through assertion of difference from others” (*Mappings* 135). According to Friedman, one of the reasons why cultures erect these boundaries is the attempt to get “protection from more powerful others” (*Mappings* 135). However, it is important to notice that this does not mean that cultures may remain homogeneous and separated from all the others, since they are “always reactively and syncretistically formed (and reformed) in relation to other cultures” (Friedman, *Mappings* 134). What happens is that cultures resort to this strategy of erecting boundaries for the sake of self-defense and for maintaining homogeneity, but, in fact, they are always heterogeneous and the individuals are always subjected to live in the *borderland*, which is an “indeterminate, potentially shifting and broad terrain across and through which intercultural traffic and transaction circulate” (Friedman, *Mappings* 135). Khadija, differently from her parents, is more worried about having to live in the borderland than about constructing boundaries between one culture and the other.

The way Khadija’s parents – and especially her father – do not seem to adapt to the life in the United States, and the way they are always defensive against the American culture bothers Khadija, because she just cannot understand why a person remains so connected to a previous life, which was left behind a long time ago, instead of moving on and enjoying what the new country has to offer. However, Khadija does

not understand that her parents used to have dreams that have never come true, and, for them, this new reality of frustrated expectations is strictly connected to the United States. Khadija's father, for instance, is an extremely afflicted man, who cultivates a never-ending nostalgia towards Palestine and a sense of rejection for the United States, transforming these feelings and reactions into aggressiveness.

When describing her traditional father, Khadija mentions that she would rather he did not tell her about his sorrows and grieves, because, through them, she has the feeling that "something awful will happen" (37). Even though Khadija knows that her father likes her a lot, especially because she is his only daughter (75), she knows that he has some very shady aspects in his personality: "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" (37). Here, once again, the generation gap between Khadija and her father can be noticed, since the girl cannot visit the places where her father's thoughts are because she does not know these places and does not share them with her father.

Although Khadija cannot fully understand why her father has such reactions, since a great part of her family has also left Palestine, just like he has, but lives very different and optimistic lives in the United States (39), she is aware of the supposed sources of his many problems: "My father has many dreams that have been filled with sand. That's what he tells me: 'This country has taken my dreams that used to float like those giant balloons, and filled them with sand. Now they don't float, and you can't even see what they are anymore'" (37). Therefore, for Khadija's father, the United States is responsible for the frustrations he has in life, although he does not clearly present the reasons that make that country be guilty and play the role of a villain to him. Since

Khadija's family has a tough life in the United States, going through financial difficulties, and her father does not have a stable job, being the third mechanic of a repair shop, these may be the possible reasons why he blames the United States for having robbed him of his dreams. Although this is not mentioned in the novel, the family probably went to the United States expecting better life conditions, but, instead, found difficulties in maintaining and adapting themselves to the new country.

If, in the novel, the reasons why the United States are to be blamed by Khadija's father do not become very clear for the readers, the main source of his discontentment is blatantly stated. He often tells her: "my ache comes from losing my home" (39). Khadija's father permanently regrets not being in Palestine anymore and the absence of his homeland has never been overcome. This situation leads him to what, in Mawal's reading of the situation, seems to be a frequent habit of Palestinian men who move to the United States: alcoholism. At a certain point, Mawal cites some "evils" to which Arab men are introduced in the United States, and among them are "drugs and drinking and loose women and gambling" (15).

Khadija's father succumbs to alcohol, and it affects the lives of the entire family, especially his daughter's. There is an episode, for instance, in which Khadija's father, who is drunk at that moment, makes her drink some liquor against her will, and then tells Shahira that their daughter has been drinking. The moments in which this episode happens are very intense, because Khadija's father really forces her to drink, and although she tries to resist, he wins and she ends up drinking the liquor. After that, he finishes the humiliating moments by aggressively grabbing Khadija and taking her to her mother. The anguish Khadija goes through is vividly felt by the reader as she describes the episode:

I remained where I was, but the fire went from my belly to his eyes and 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.’ My mother leaned over me and sniffed my mouth and I closed my eyes. She slapped my face and the fire came back to me. ‘He made me drink it,’ I screamed, and saw my father’s eyes enlarge. ‘A drinker and a liar!’ he shouted, and started hitting me everywhere. I screamed and screamed and finally got free and ran to my room. I opened the closet and closed the door behind me and prayed to God the fire would burn somewhere else. (38-39)

As we can see, this is one of the horrifying moments that Khadija goes through, having an abusive father and a passive mother, who refuses to listen to her daughter and just acts according to what her husband believes is appropriate. Khadija is defenseless and does not have anyone to protect her when her own father humiliates and insults her by calling her “a little dog,” “a drinker,” and “a liar.” Although this is an extremely shocking episode that alone would be sufficient to exemplify the kind of treatment Khadija receives at home and also the oppression and subjugation that victimize her, there are several other moments in the novel which show that Khadija feels imprisoned by her parents, especially by her father, and also by gender restrictions. One of these episodes happens when Khadija and her family go to a wedding, and she starts dancing with her cousin Soraya, and Ginna, who is Soraya’s American friend. The girls dance like the other people do, “nothing flashy, no show-off shaking” (33), as Soraya describes it. Khadija looks happy and she smiles all the time, until her father grabs her by the arm and starts offending Ginna, as though the girls were committing a crime or a



sin: “‘Slut,’ he said to Ginna, . . . ‘How dare you lay a hand on my daughter.’ . . . He spat and looked back at Ginna. ‘Don’t you ever get near my daughter again.’” (33-34). The father’s irrational actions leave Ginna and Soraya completely exasperated, and Khadija becomes extremely embarrassed, wishing she could just disappear.

The reasons why he acts like this, and especially his fury towards Ginna are intriguing, since the girl was aware of how conservative the Arab culture is, and she did not wear a provocative dress and did not behave inappropriately even for a second at the wedding party. The lack of rational motivations for Khadija’s father to have such attitudes only emphasize the fact that he cannot stand having Khadija out of his control and specially in the company of a young girl who does not belong neither to his family nor to the Arab community. The mere fact that Khadija starts interacting with Ginna scares her father, who is afraid she will stray from what he believes are the correct Arab moral codes and behaviors.

Another episode which shows Khadija’s suffering and imprisonment happens when her older brother, Muhammad, tells their father that he saw Khadija kissing a boy at school the previous day. He invents this story in order to take revenge on Khadija, who had taken two dollars from him to buy a barrette. Once again, Khadija’s father beats and insults her for something that she has not done, without even giving her an opportunity to explain herself. According to Soraya’s narration of events, “Khadija’s father didn’t ask her if it was true, he just came after her with a belt, yelling *slut* and *whore* at her. She didn’t go to school for two days, and the next time I saw her she wouldn’t look at me, just held her head down as if her shoes were the prettiest thing ever” (31). The patterns of both Khadija’s and her father’s behaviors are recurrent, as it can be seen: the father is irrational and aggressive, while the daughter is oppressed and passive.

Her father's aggressiveness reaches its maximum in "Fire," which is the last chapter of the novel that is dedicated to Khadija. The title of the chapter already foreshadows its content of abuse and violence, because in the previous chapters Khadija associates fire with her father's excessive drinking (38). In this episode, which takes place one day before Shahira returns home after visiting her dying mother in Nawara, Khadija's father heavily drinks and hits Hamouda, Khadija's brother who is only two and a half years old. The hitting begins because the baby looks at his father and says "wild dogs with a tick ass" (207). Obviously, he is not aware of what he is saying and, although this is not clearly stated in the chapter, he is only repeating his mother's words, who, at a certain point in the story, says her children are "like wild dogs with ticks in your asses" (149). During this past episode, Khadija even remarks that her mother "doesn't say this around my father, though, because he doesn't think women should swear and he'll slap her if she does" (149). Therefore, Khadija's father is probably mad because he knows Hamouda had heard these words before, possibly from his mother or brothers, otherwise the baby would not repeat it.

Khadija's narration of these moments is extremely afflicting and shows how her father was out of control. According to her,

Baba sets on fire and I'm in the kitchen trying to be invisible and slap slap slap and the baby cries, so I go to see and Hamouda's arm is in my father's teeth and blood and then Siddi [her grandfather] comes up to hold my father or to take the baby from him, and my father hits him hard, his own father, and knocks him to the floor and then goes back to the baby, who's just crying and crying and crying. (207)

Witnessing this despairing scene and watching her father hit her grandfather and her brother, who are both much weaker than he is, Khadija instantly decides to call the

police to denounce her father. Khadija calling the police can be interpreted as an extreme cry for help, since her very parents, who were supposed to care for her, were involved in a never-ending, and unreasonable, battle against her, instead of providing her with safety and protection.

The last chapter of the book dedicated to Khadija ends up with the girl in a state that is very characteristic of the way her life is. She is scared about what she has done and she is afraid of the future, because she knows that what she did will not have pleasant consequences, and even though she acted so as to protect her brother and her grandfather, she knows these consequences will be directed to her and she will be blamed for whatever happens to her father and to her family: “Scary is what is going to happen to us until Ma comes home. Scary is what Ma will do and if they’ll say it’s my fault” (208). Thus, Khadija knows that the situation will not get any better for her, and she knows that the fact she called the police to denounce her own father will shock everyone and will probably make people, especially her mother, position themselves against her, since Arab women are supposed to respect their fathers and not to react against them.

Thus, we can see, throughout the entire novel that Khadija is a victim of lies and misinterpretations which are, invariably, told and caused by male characters. Offenses related to gender enable us to see, and all of the lies and situations invented to jeopardize Khadija are, without exception, related to what young women, according to the dogmas of the Arab culture, are not advisable to do, if they do not want to be despised: drinking, having fun, and interacting with boys. Thus, besides the confusions that Khadija undergoes by being a girl in-between two cultures, she suffers the consequences of being a girl in a family led by an extremely conservative father, and in a culture that expects women to strictly obey and follow its principles.

However, the tough situations regarding gender which Khadija undergoes are not exclusively related to the Arab world, because even though she feels more identification with the American culture, this does not mean that it brings her enough comfort and support, for she is also lost and intimidated by this culture and its customs, especially when it comes to liberation. Liberation, for Khadija, is far from being a synonym of freedom and power of choice, but instead, she feels extremely uncomfortable bearing the heavy weight of *having* to be free as everyone else appears to be.

In the novel there is a specific episode which shows that, regarding sexuality, Khadija's opinions and behaviors greatly diverge from the American culture and from the other American members of her generation. When Khadija goes to Patsy's house to do her homework, after school, Patsy leaves her alone, and says she will study in another room with Michael, who is also Khadija's friend and to whom she nurtures feelings of admiration and affection throughout the novel. Although she is very naïve and does not know what is happening between Patsy and Michael, Khadija seems to foresee that something bad might be about to happen, because, according to her, when Patsy announces she was going to another room, even her "ugly-sounding name sounded uglier than usual" (179). It is important to notice that, as soon as Khadija feels she is being rejected, the fact that she is put aside is associated with her foreign name and with the displacement she feels being an Arab descendent in the United States.

When she realizes that Patsy and Michael have been gone for a while, Khadija goes after them, and, alienated from what might be happening, she goes to Patsy's parents' bedroom in order to see what they are doing. At the moment she gets there, she finds her friends under the covers and she feels extremely ashamed of what she is seeing:

I turned away and shut the door behind me. I felt horrible, like can't-see and can't-think kind of horrible. My books were all over the place and I couldn't stuff them in my bag fast enough. I ran from her front door to our house. Thinking about what I saw made me feel dirty, like when you go by a car crash and look by accident and on purpose at the same time, but then you feel sick because of what you saw. (179-80)

Khadija feels that she is dirty for having been a witness of that scene and she feels terrified at knowing that sexuality, which has always been constructed, for her, as something unnatural and wrong, especially for girls, is present within her environment and among her very own friends. In other words, Khadija is scared because sexuality, which should be distant from her life, in fact is closely surrounding her.

Therefore, sexuality works, in the novel, as an important aspect that causes Khadija's displacement within the American culture, and, despite her belief that she is fully American and not Arab in absolutely no instances, it is to her Arab family and Arab house to which she runs after going through these terrible moments. It is there, in the arms of her mother, and surrounded by the Arab presence, that Khadija tries to find comfort and relief, and she literally runs away from the pain that American cultures causes in her. At this moment, her Arab family and Arab house work as a shelter for the girl.

This posture that Khadija has towards sexuality was constructed by her family and by the Arab culture, perhaps as a way of keeping her attached to the Arab customs, avoiding a full integration with the American culture. The beliefs which are part of the Arab culture, including conceptions about sexuality that are transmitted to Khadija by her parents and by the Arab community are useful for the Arab people to strengthen their culture and to draw a line between it and other cultures, such as the American one,

in an attempt of self-protection. There are, in the novel, several passages which show how Khadija's education, mainly grounded on the fact that she is a girl, was oriented towards repression and submission.

Regarding sexuality, the issue of virginity is of high importance to the Arab culture, and Shahira always keeps her daughters aware of it and emphasizes the differences between the values present in the Arab culture and the American one, as well as the existing differences between Arab men and the American ones, trying to erect, once again, the boundaries between cultures, as Friedman states and as it was already discussed previously on this dissertation. About her education on sexuality, Khadija says:

Ma always used to tell my two half sisters about boys, especially American boys, and how they will take that secret thing between your legs for nothing. 'No committer.' . . . 'Your husband has to be the one to take it away from you,' Ma told me once. 'Otherwise you are a disgrace to us and we are stuck with you forever.' Then she said, in English, 'You shameful.' (178-79)

Therefore, sexuality for Khadija has always been mysterious and a "secret thing," because her mother and the Arab culture, in general, refuse to provide this kind of information to girls, and, as a consequence, they become afraid of dealing with such issues.

Moreover, the fact that girls should maintain themselves pure for their husbands, under the risk of becoming a shame and a disgrace to the family, is constantly emphasized by Shahira. It is important to highlight that Khadija remembers these words which were frequently uttered by her mother exactly when she sees Patsy and Michael under the covers, or, in her own words, when she is the witness of this "ugly secret"

(178), which shows that she is terrified at the confrontation between her Arab-related beliefs and the American environment of sexual liberation.

Still regarding the ways in which gender and sexuality have been constructed, for Khadija, it is possible to see that she has always been aware of the differences that exist between men and women within the Arab culture, even though her perception of these differences is related to small events and probably she is not aware of them in a greater scale. Khadija notices that there are several behaviors which are not appropriate for girls, especially as they grow older. For instance, she mentions that now that she is getting older, she is not supposed to play with boys anymore (74) and instead of participating of the conversations between her father and his friends as she used to do when she was younger, now she has to cut vegetables (75) and is not allowed to talk to boys (149).

Besides, Khadija is aware that these differences between men and women are usually favorable to boys, who, the way she sees it, have much more fun than women do:

She [Khadija's mother] is always telling Baba how shameful it is that I don't speak my language, that I don't mind her, and that I walk like a boy. I sort of like the boy part of what she says, because those girls are so silly – always brushing their hair and listening to music. I hate dancing in front of all those people. My boy cousins are more fun, but I'm not supposed to play with them anymore because I'm getting too old. (74-75)

Gender and cultural issues go together in Shahira's perception of her daughter, even though she is probably not aware of the connections between them. For Shahira, Khadija's not speaking Arabic and not caring about Arab culture is directly associated with her sometimes acting like a boy. In other words, for Shahira, the lack of

connections between Khadija and the Arab culture also represent the absence of more feminine or girlish traits in her. Moreover, Khadija likes to be associated with boys because she knows that they are the ones who have more freedom and have options other than brushing hair, listening to music and “spend[ing] all your time noticing what everyone does wrong” (105).

Thus, Khadija suffers several restrictions throughout the whole story. She does not feel comfortable assuming neither an American identity nor an Arab one, and at the same time she thinks she is much more related to the United States than to Palestine, she gets terrified by the American freedom with its different customs. However, if identification with the more traditional traits of the Arab culture seems appropriate to fill this gap that the American culture leaves in her, Khadija cannot feel a sense of belonging to her parents’ culture either, because she is a second-generation immigrant and was not even born in Palestine. Therefore, Khadija is caught in-between two cultures to which she does not belong and with which she does not identify, leaving her with a strong sense of loss and displacement.

To make matters worse, Khadija is displaced in her own nuclear family, because she does not have anyone to protect her and to care for her. Her abusive father and submissive mother only contribute to increase her sense of not belonging anywhere, and, therefore, she is constantly haunted by fear. In fact, as Abdelrazek very appropriately argues,

Fear governs Khadija’s life – a great fear of the future, of the unknown, of her present as a misfit in both cultures, and more importantly of her father, whose abusive and aggressive attitude towards her is crucial in shaping her fragmented and displaced identity. Hers is a story of loss:



loss of a homeland, of dignity, of self-confidence, and of dreams. (151-52)

Therefore, Khadija's displacement goes beyond her being positioned between two virtually distinct cultures, since even inside her own home she cannot feel stable and secure. Despite the multiple manifestations of her displacement, however, they are all basically generated by her situation as a diasporic subject who feels lost, confused and extremely restricted by gender constraints. Even some aspects which, at first, may not seem to be related to diaspora and gender issues can be connected to them. For instance, if the loss "of dignity, of self-confidence, and of dreams" (152) about which Abdelrazek writes is mostly derived from her parents' behavior, then it is indirectly originated from their conditions as diasporic subjects who are lost and frustrated, and who transmits all these feelings and attitudes to Khadija.

In conclusion, Khadija's fears and feelings of displacement are mostly derived from her diasporic situation, and this shows how diaspora issues can affect one's whole identity and positioning in the world and how second generation immigrants are doubly influenced by their condition, since the input they receive from their parents tends to be extremely different from the input received from the cultural environment they inhabit. If these people do not have enough support from their families, and if they do not have any strong bases to which they can resort, as it is the case of Khadija, this double input received by them – from their parents and from the cultural environment of the U.S. – opens possibilities for them to be twice as confused and disoriented. As a consequence, they, many times, seem to be moving towards assimilation, as an effort of stop living in a divided and liminal world, but, in fact, they are lost between two worlds, trying to find a more definite positioning in the midst of the turbulence, and not necessarily wanting to assimilate, as it is the case of Khadija.

## 2. Behind the Steel Curtain: Soraya's Experiences of Frustrated Assimilation

The second narrator-character of the novel, Soraya, was born in Palestine, but moved to the United States with her parents when she was still very young. Living almost her entire life in that country made Soraya feel more attached to the American culture than to the Arab one. Soraya believes in freedom: she considers herself as sexually liberated and she says she wants to be free from the restrictions imposed by categories, such as "Arab" or "American". However, when one analyzes Soraya's attitudes and behaviors, it is possible to notice that, despite her supposed craving for freedom, this character is, in fact, trapped in the desire to be accepted by the American people, experiencing, as a consequence, a frustrated assimilation. Thus, this chapter will investigate how Soraya relates to the American culture, wishing to be fully integrated to it. Moreover, this work will analyze the frustrated assimilation that the character experiences, since she ends up perceiving that a complete assimilation is a fantasy and something impossible to be fully achieved, which makes her turn her eyes back to her roots in Palestine.

Soraya's perceptions of herself are crucial to the understanding of her relations with both the American and the Arab communities. Soraya knows she is an attractive girl and she is aware that this attractiveness is often associated, by the American people, with the stereotyped exoticism that revolves around the image of Arab women. About this, she says: "I have fire. Everyone knows it. They see it in my beautiful brown exotic eyes that I paint full of Maybelline kohl to turn my tears black. 'She's Arabian,' they say at my high school as I pass by them" (24). At first, when one analyzes this quotation, one might think that Soraya is proud of being Arab and of being recognized as such, since she highlights her Arab traits, like the beautiful brown eyes.

However, pride is not exactly what guides Soraya's actions and behaviors throughout the novel. In fact, when she calls attention to her "Arabness," she disseminates and reinforces Arab stereotypes so as to satisfy the American people, by solidifying the myths and misconceptions in which they believe. When she listens to her classmates talking about their wrong perceptions of her place of origin, besides not correcting them, she joins their mystifications: "In her country they don't have furniture or dishwashers, only oil'. I tell them what they want to hear, which is nasty stories about young men sticking their things into goats and some twelve-year-old girl being carried off on a camel to be third wife to old Shaykh So-and-So and the five oil wells my father owns" (24). It is possible to see that Soraya appeals to the grossest stereotypes related to the Arab world, acting as if the Arab culture were really only about shaykhs, camels, and oil.

By blatantly saying that she tells the American people what they want to hear, Soraya admits that her main objective is to satisfy them, and she also implies that social acceptance is what matters for her, even though she needs to be exoticized in order to achieve this. Her mother's reactions against this are not enough to make her change her attitudes. About this, Soraya says: "My mother exploded the first time she heard about a story I told. 'You have to show the best of us, not the ugly lies.' But I let my ambassador sister and cousins do that while I talk ghetto slang" (24). Therefore, Soraya implies that there are already many people in her family performing the diplomatic task of showing the American people the best of the Arab world and trying to dissolve the existing stereotypes. Because of this, the way she sees it, she does not need to be another "ambassador" for the Arab community and, consequently, she does not need to worry about clarifying the image of the Arabs before the American people's eyes. Instead of handling the diplomatic tasks, Soraya wants to "talk ghetto slang," that is, she

wants to be associated with the easygoing parcel of American people, who are not concerned about being “politically correct” and, therefore, do not think that disseminating stereotypes about other people is something problematic.

Helping to mystify the Arab culture is not the only attitude taken by Soraya which is against her family and her community’s approval. Throughout the novel, Soraya demonstrates, in several different occasions, that she is not concerned with what is thought of her or if she is behaving appropriately. She is aware of all the disapproval that surrounds her, but she is convinced that her reasons to behave differently are true and genuine:

My sister and cousins are the way my mother wishes I were and she is always comparing us and telling me what good girls they are and how I am just a headache . . . She can’t accept that my way of being different is just as good as everyone else’s way of being the same. I like to enjoy myself, unlike my sister Pauline who, despite her American name, is very conservative and believes that all answers lie in God’s words and that suffering is good. (25)

It is interesting to notice that Soraya associates liberation with the American culture, because she says that *despite* having an American name, her sister is very conservative. Therefore, when Soraya acts differently from her sister and cousins, she is, in her mind, getting closer to the American culture and more distant from the Arab world.

A possible reason for the great distance between Soraya and the Arab culture is related to the absence of memories of her hometown, very similar to what happens with her cousin Khadija. Since the character moved to the United States when she was still very young, she does not cultivate many memories of Palestine and of her family that was left behind. The absence of these memories originates, in Soraya, a lack of more

solid references of her culture and her community, which makes her feel, throughout the novel, a greater sense of belonging to the American culture than to the Arab one. A counterpoint to Soraya's situation is the character Hala – which will be analyzed further in this dissertation –, because Hala, who moved to the United States when she was already seventeen years old, has many memories that work as references for her to keep close to the Arab culture.

According to the critic Andreas Huyssen, in the essay entitled “Diaspora and Nation: Migration into Other Pasts,” the ulterior generations of immigrants, as is the case of Soraya, have concerns which are different from those of the previous generations, and do not view the memories related to their places of birth in the same way that her parents and grandparents do. Huyssen states that

The traditional understanding of diaspora as loss of homeland and desire to return itself becomes largely irrelevant for the second and third generations who . . . are no longer conversant in language and culture of the country of their ancestors. Whether or not they were to describe themselves as diasporic subjects, the key problems lie in their relation to the national culture they live in rather than to the imaginary of roots in the culture of ancestors. It is primarily a problem of life in the present and the negotiation with the host culture. (162)

Therefore, for Soraya, differently from what happens to the first-generation immigrants, the establishment of firm connections with the United States becomes much more important than the nurturing of the memories related to the Arab community.

This happens because the connections with the host country are the fundamental points for her, since they are exactly what define how Soraya's life will be and how she will be viewed by the people who belong to that new community. Regarding this, she

states: “The older people all act the same way they did when they were home, which isn’t fair in a lot of ways because we’re in America now, but they tell us we are not supposed to be living an American life” (31). Thus, Soraya’s concerns and the investments she makes must lie in the present time, which is, for her, a moment strictly related to the United States. Besides, in another passage of the novel, while reflecting about what her uncle, Haydar, told her regarding the loss of a country and home, Soraya’s positioning in relation to the past becomes even clearer:

Losing a country is what makes your eyes dance, is what my Uncle Haydar told me once. That works for him because he has lost his country. Even though we come from the same place, and I am from the grandfather who was his father, I have been here too long with a father who wants to be too successful for my country to be lost. My eyes dance because I am alive, but I don’t tell Haydar that... (115)

Different from the previous generations of immigrants, Soraya does not feel she has lost a country, because in her present situation – when her eyes are focused on the present, and not on the past –, she does not even consider that she has ever had a relation of belonging with a place other than the United States. Thus, Soraya’s eyes do not dance because she lost a country, since, according to what she implies, one cannot lose something that one never really had.

In the novel, the character Hala, aware of the way in which ulterior generations deal with memories, appropriately summarizes the situation of these people. While reflecting about this situation, she states: “Remember the young ones, who came here as babies, but who cannot remember what they have not seen and therefore have no reason to behave” (219). In other words, Hala understands that expecting later generations of immigrants to behave entirely according to the Arab values and traditions is unreal,

since, most of the times, these people simply do not have an intimate and direct connection with them.

Soraya's behavior towards the Arab memories and culture is a source of conflicts between the girl and her mother, who believes her daughter was seduced by the American illusion, leaving her roots behind. About this, Soraya affirms: "My mother is disappointed because I am not a good daughter, but she won't admit she has anything to do with it and says instead that I have a weak spirit and have been 'taken in by the lie that is America: freedom, freedom, freedom'" (24-25). When she says that Soraya is not a "good daughter", the character's mother implies that a good daughter is the one who strictly follows what is expected by the Arab culture. However, it is impossible for Soraya to have such a behavior or to cultivate the memories of her homeland, if she has lived the greatest part of her life in the United States. It is also interesting to notice, through this quotation, that Soraya blames her mother for having taken her to a distant country, very different from Palestine, and still expect her to cultivate strong attachments to her prior homeland, and to have a behavior that is entirely suitable to the Arab values.

Just like in Khadija's case, as it was already explored, for Soraya, the generation gap is a cause of conflicts between the character and her parents. The arguments developed by the theorists Braziel, Mannur and Radhakrishnan, which were analyzed previously in this dissertation, all show that belonging to different generations of immigrants strongly influences the ways in which the diasporic processes are perceived and experienced, and, thus, this is a relevant aspect both for the analysis of Khadija and Soraya. However, there is an important difference between these two characters when it comes to generational issues. While Khadija only complains about her parents not being

able to understand the way she relates to the Arab and American cultures, Soraya takes a step further and is critical about her parents' attitudes.

While reporting what her mother said about her being taken by the lie that is America, Soraya gives the following account about herself: "I know she can't wait until next year is over and I'm done with high school so she can marry me off and concentrate on the things that matter to her, like her house and her hair" (24-25). Therefore, Soraya knows that her mother's attitudes are somehow similar to her own, since America has also exerted much influence over her. She is aware that her mother privileges frivolities such as her house and hair over her own family, and, thus, she is not the right person to criticize the "American lies," because she, as well, is constantly seduced by them.

Besides, Soraya is also aware that her father has priorities which do not include his family: "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 favorite thing, like somewhere along the way he decided he could only focus on one thing and he thought better money than family, less headaches" (25-26). Thus, similarly to what happens to Soraya's mother, her father is also concerned about superficialities, often despising his family, and she is rather aware of this. Soraya, then, is unable to be the daughter her parents expect her to be not only because of the generation gap that exists between them, but also, and perhaps most importantly, because she knows that they, who blame her for having been seduced by American illusions, are part of what they criticize. Therefore, she knows that they are not role models for her, since they are not able to put what they tell her to do into practice.

Thus, willing to be free from these hypocrisies, Soraya does not hesitate in doing whatever she wants to do, without worrying if she will have her parents' approval or



not. Moreover, Soraya strongly criticizes the aspects of the Arab culture which prevent women from acting the way she does. In other words, in several passages throughout the novel, not only does Soraya act based on what she considers her true desires, exempted from the influences of others, but she is also critical of the Arab customs and traditions that, for her, work so as to restrict women's possibilities. A good example of Soraya's attachment to her supposed free will is her passion for dancing. Instead of dancing discreetly like Arab women are advised to do, so as not to call men's attention, Soraya is always very enthusiastic when she dances, and she likes exactly to be seen by other people and to be admired by men:

It always happens like this: when it comes time for the women to dance, I put them to shame. Even when I was little it happened like that. I don't know where it comes from, but they know it too – it's fire. They talk about how bad I am, especially at weddings in the States, because I dance shamelessly where men can see me and not just in front of other women and a camera. (29)

Soraya knows that the way she dances is not appropriate according to the Arab tradition, but she keeps doing it, and she is very proud of this "fire" that makes her dance. Perhaps she is proud of it because she knows that there is much behind her dancing: there is, for instance, another opportunity of transgression and self-expression.

According to Abdelrazek, dancing is "Soraya's way of letting out her frustration as well as expressing her joy, tasting her freedom, and rebelling against all restrictions imposed on her by any kind of authority, including her own mother and Arab culture" (141). Regarding her mother's impositions, Soraya feels that they are not based on coherent grounds, since her mother is not able to satisfactorily explain her the reasons why she should not dance the way she does. Soraya's mother tells her daughter that "It

is not proper to behave like that, like a loose woman” (29), but the girl cannot understand why showing herself when dancing makes her be a loose woman, so she defies her mother: ““But if I’m happy, what’s wrong with that?”” (29). However, the mother does not find any convincing reasons, and simply states: ““You shouldn’t show it. Finish”” (29). Here, it is possible to notice that Soraya’s happiness is undermined by a set of rules and traditions which do not make any sense for the girl.

Before this lack of explanations, Soraya wonders why her mother cannot see anything beyond the Arab rules and traditions. She says: “I like to have fun, to enjoy myself and to feel good. I have always been that way. My mother tells me how wrong this is, like it is evil or something and my sister says the same thing. I think they think it’s wrong because they don’t know what it is to be satisfied, and it scares them” (30). According to Soraya, then, a possible reason for her mother’s censorship is the fact that she does not know how good it feels to exercise her freedom, and, therefore, she feels scared and prefers to stay away from it.

Another criticism expressed by Soraya regarding the positioning of women within the Arab culture is related to sexism. Soraya thinks that the supremacy men have over women in the Arab culture is entirely irrational, and she is especially critical of Khadija’s father. In the episode that Soraya invites Khadija to dance during a wedding party, which was already explored earlier in this dissertation, Soraya cannot believe how coward and disrespectful Khadija’s father is in relation to his daughter and to Ginna, Soraya’s American friend. He humiliated Khadija in front of everyone by forcefully dragging her away with no apparent reasons, and insulted Ginna by loudly calling her a “slut” and spitting in front of her to show his disgust, only because she was dancing with Khadija. Soraya gets extremely mad at her uncle, but, most of all, her anger comes from the fact that many women listened to what he said at the party, but no one dared to

do or say anything against him: “All those ladies heard my uncle’s stupid words, but no one stopped him, like a wild dog allowed to bite everyone” (35). Therefore, Soraya was ashamed of her community and family, which, in a way, allows a man to mistreat women and prohibits women to talk back to him.

Besides, to make the situation even worse, Ginna decides to leave the party, since she could not stand that situation anymore. Soraya, once again, feels extremely embarrassed, and when Ginna announces her decision to leave, Soraya says: “Suddenly the humiliation that Khadija had on her face drenched me. I felt dirty, as if I was walking naked and people were throwing mud at me” (34). Also, a few lines ahead, Soraya says that when she said good-bye to Ginna, she was “feeling as though someone had poured acid into [her] belly” (35). Soraya, who, throughout almost the entire novel, is willing to delight and entertain her American friends, does not get upset, in this episode, because of her inability to continue doing this. Instead, Soraya becomes frustrated because, exactly when she shows some disposition to introduce a friend to what her community really is, and not to the stereotypes she often helps to perpetuate, all she encounters is sexism and humiliation coming from men, and, on the other hand, passivity coming from women.

Furthermore, Soraya analyzes and criticizes the behavior of women in her family and in the Arab society, in general, regarding sex. When she mentions that Arab women seem to be afraid of being satisfied (30), as I showed a few lines above, she ends up saying: “It seems all of the women in our family are like this. Even though married ladies talk about sex, it is always within the context of a marriage and you have to have been a virgin” (30). It is clear that Soraya does not agree with this pattern of behavior, because, for her, it is unacceptable that women have, as their priorities, traditions they are not even able to understand, instead of their happiness and satisfaction. The

Palestinian-American poet Nathalie Handal, in an article about sex and feminism, writes about her process of going beyond the idea of sex as it was cultivated by the Arab community. She argues: “Personally, I had to deconstruct my notion that I would dishonor the family and myself if I had sex, deconstruct my belief that I was a whore if I enjoyed sex. I needed to gain knowledge and acknowledgement” (100). This process, which she calls the “unveiling of the mind” (101), is also undergone by Soraya, in Halaby’s novel, since she believes that Arab women can be much more than simply a “virgin” or a “whore”.

Therefore, Soraya reacts against the patterns of behaviors in which she does not believe, by following her desires and ignoring the rules and moral codes that are supposed to guide Arab women. For instance, Soraya blatantly admits that she lies to her parents in order to meet men. She says: “This year I told my family a thousand and one lies and went to a disco and danced for a beautiful man who came to love me, love me so much that I carried his credit card, wore his jewelry, and had lunch with him until I satisfied him in every way” (28). Here, it is possible to see that Soraya’s idea of freedom is strongly related to the idea of sexual liberation. She is proud of supposedly having control over her body and performing her independence based on her desires and not on the discipline that the Arab traditions try to impose on her.

Soraya vaingloriously reaffirms her status as a free woman by saying: “I am a new breed. A rebel. My mother and her sisters can spill a story from any woman, but I can make a man talk. I am in between. Familiar ears. Safe mouth. I have men as friends, as well as lovers” (56). By stating that she is a new breed, Soraya emphasizes that she is different from her female relatives, who, as she stated before, do not know what it is to be satisfied and who can only disclose women’s secrets. According to the way Soraya sees it, this new breed to which she belongs is entirely her own breed, one that makes

her special because it provides her with the ability of getting closer to men: physically, because of all the sexual freedom she permits herself to enjoy, and psychologically because of her capacity to make men share their secrets with her.

Besides, Soraya's stating that she is in between, in the previous quotation, refers to the fact that she has supposedly found a balance within this new breed to which she belongs. This new breed is not composed by any extremes which classify her either as a saint or a sinner, as her culture very often determines. Regarding these classifications that end up confining people, and especially women, Soraya says: "I'm so sick of everything being *haram* or *halal*, but nothing in between. I am in between" (117). In Islam, *haram* is the word which represents everything that is forbidden or unlawful according to the Quran, while *halal* represents all that is allowed and legal (Khan 208). Soraya wants to escape from these labels which seem radical and limiting for her, and her way of doing it is supposedly putting her freedom of choice into practice, without worrying about external regulations. This attitude that she adopts makes her believe she is going through a unique path that does not restrict her neither within the Arab culture nor within the American one.

However, Soraya's sense of freedom and of belonging to a new breed can be contested through a deeper analysis of her attitudes and behaviors. Especially regarding her relationships with men, it is possible to see, in several passages of the novel, that her emphasis on liberation and free will hides, in reality, a strong desire to belong to a group, and, more specifically, to the American community. Indeed, Soraya wants freedom, but her concept of freedom is more associated to the idea of American liberty than to a more personal level of independence, as she strongly tries to pretend to herself and to the others.

When describing her relationship with an American man, Soraya states:

I carried his credit card, wore his jewelry, and had lunch with him until I satisfied him in every way. Then he returned to his blond American wife and two blond American children while I folded myself into the boxes that once bulged with sparkling promises, waiting for the ache to leave, which it did eventually. (28)

The bitter tone used by Soraya shows that, although she tries to pretend she is guided by thoughts related to enjoying the moment and its inherent freedom, she is, in fact, deeply affected by feelings. After she is abandoned by the man, there is, for Soraya, frustration and ache, since she once had created romantic expectations about him. Through the bitterness present in Soraya's talk, it is possible to notice that more than suffering from a broken heart, Soraya suffers because she knows this man will go back to his typical American family. The fact that she is not part of this American ideal, and will never truly be, brings her more resentment than actually being rejected by the man.

Here, we begin to notice that Soraya's talk about belonging to a new breed may hide a feeling of frustration, since she would like to be seen as an American and to occupy the position of these blond American wives, and not remain the exotic Arab girl who entertains men and is later abandoned by them. Therefore, what could seem, at first, Soraya's pure interest in the man's money and jewelry ends up revealing a different aspect of her approximation with him. If the situation is seen through the lenses of frustrated assimilation, as I suggest, Soraya's bragging about carrying the man's credit card and wearing his jewels can be understood as her craving to be, somehow, part of the man's life, and it might signify, to her, that she, just like the blond American wife has, somehow, access to his world.

Besides this anonymous man that Soraya mentions, there is, in the novel, another relationship which is crucial to the understanding of Soraya's frustrated assimilation:

that between her and her uncle, Haydar. Haydar is her mother's brother and is now considered a crazy man by the members of her family and by part of the Arab community that lives in Arizona. Readers know more about his life only in the final pages of the novel, through Soraya's narration of the most secret story she has ever heard from a man. She begins the chapter "Love Story/ Remembering Story" by affirming: "Like I said, I can make a man talk. That includes my crazy uncle Haydar. I know his truth. He fed it to me once. So long ago and it is still my secret" (175). The secret which strongly connects Soraya and Haydar belongs, in a certain way, to both of them, since it is related to Haydar's father, who is also Soraya's grandfather, and it is this secret that Soraya poetically tells the readers.

A long time ago, back in Nawara, Haydar's father was murdered very close to their house and Haydar witnessed everything. Right after this, Haydar stopped seeing for some time, probably because of the trauma, and after a while, "he taught himself to run and run and almost fly. He ran and ran, forever and faster than anyone and then he ran across the ocean, but not before he painted the sky with the blood of those men who took everything away" (177). These men who took everything away are Haydar's father's murderers, who, according to what he tells Soraya, killed him because he was a man who brought many new and good ideas to the village, but these ideas were not accepted by some inhabitants of the place. For the sake of revenge, Haydar killed them, but could never recover from this hard experience and, therefore, he continues to be haunted by memories that cause him to behave differently from everyone else. Among the people of his family, the explanation for Haydar's behavior lies in a mental illness which is supposedly aggravated by the drugs he takes. Soraya is the only one who knows the truth since a very young age and who ends up having to bear her uncle's burden.

Besides this burden, Soraya and Haydar's relationship is another secret that is known only by the both of them and by Hamdi, Haydar's brother and Soraya's uncle, who lives in Arizona with Hala. Soraya discovers that he knows about her affair with Haydar only in the very last chapter of the novel, when she goes to Arizona in order to meet her uncle with the excuse of visiting her cousin Hala. During this visit, Hamdi tells her that he knows about everything and, showing great understanding, advises Soraya to stay away from Haydar:

Soraya, I want to do what is right, to help you find what is right. I have told no one, and I will respect your wishes, as you are a young woman, not a child. You can always come to me, but please, for your own good, forget about Haydar and who he was. That person is gone. It is so hard to accept, but he is gone, whether because of his illness, or because of the drugs he takes, he is gone. (215)

The illness to which Hamdi refers is bipolarity or paranoid schizophrenia, according to what he himself tells Soraya, adding that "for real life he is crazy" (214). In order to prove his point, Hamdi takes Soraya to the front of Haydar's house, so they can watch him walking desperately on the streets, talking to pigeons and imitating statues at the city park.

While observing Haydar, Hamdi's words resonate in Soraya's mind. She affirms: "Hamdi's English words sit between us on the leather seats, like uninvited guests that squeeze you and make you want to scream. I can't even cry. I want to get out of the car, but I can't move, can't speak" (215). As I see it, for Soraya, her uncle's most disturbing and meaningful words are his last ones: "Please, please don't think of him [Haydar] as an alternative" (215). These final words are so significant because they prove my hypothesis that Soraya's relationships with men represent her attempts to



escape her reality and belong to something, even though she tries to prove to herself that all she wants is freedom and independence. Hamdi is the only character of the novel that is able to notice that Soraya searches for an alternative in her affair with Haydar, and all the other characters remain unaware of these deeper layers of Soraya's personality.

Besides Hamdi's assertion, Soraya herself states, in a previous passage of the novel, that she sees Haydar as a possible alternative to her life. In a moment of delusions, pessimism and fear of the future, she states:

My school counselor would say it was Uncle Haydar's fault. If she knew, she would talk about sexual abuse. But she doesn't know, and she'd be wrong anyhow. I choose what I do. I have always chosen what I do. We are in America now, so maybe Haydar could give me freedom, could get me to a life I can control. (190)

It is interesting to notice that Soraya is aware that her relationship with her uncle would not be considered right in the eyes of other people, and this is exactly what she supposedly wants.

Soraya even emphasizes her power of choice by reaffirming: "I choose what I do. I have always chosen what I do" (190). However, right after saying this, Soraya implies that her choices are not as free as she wishes to believe, since they are guided by a desire to belong in the United States. Being in America makes Soraya want to be part of a supposed freedom, which is the American ideal of freedom rather than her own. Moreover, by saying that she expects that Haydar could give her the power to control her own life, Soraya endorses what Hamdi has said about her seeing Haydar as an alternative in her life. Therefore, when searching for independence and freedom, Soraya is, in fact, strengthening her dependence on men, since she sees them as a good

opportunity of escaping from the restrictive reality that the Arab culture imposes on women.

Although Soraya's attempts to escape from the restrictions of the Arab culture end up leading her to find another kind of dependence, they are legitimate and evidence her desperation. She argues about the life that is waiting for her and how unfair she thinks it is:

One year away for me is a wedding, and then one little baby after another to change everything and cement it to impossibility. (No use complaining, they *will* be yours one day.) . . . I don't want a husband who walks under clouds, that is not my freedom. How can God mean this for anyone, a struggle that can never be won, a debt that can never be repaid. I sit silently and wait and pretend it does not exist, pretend there is no after-anything, that all there is, is now and I have to eat it up, devour what I can because there is no take-out service here. (190)

Therefore, Soraya is aware of the hardships found by Arab women and she does not agree with the Muslim religion that says that women are doomed to get married and raise children, because she thinks that it is too unfair to be part of God's purposes. Being aware of these difficulties encountered by Arab women is what makes Soraya want to be a rebel and to enjoy each second of her present life as she wants, because she knows this will not last for a long time.

While thinking about her future, Soraya listens to a lawn mower in the garden of her house and she wants to make sure that that noise – as well as anything else – will not distract her from her desire to escape her reality. She argues: “No matter what, I won't let that noise make me forget. It will not be the one to steal my youth and spit my soul into the gutter. Music loud, loud, loud, to drown it all and make my escape plan...”

(190-91). Therefore, for Soraya, resisting the impositions of the Arab culture is a matter of protecting her individuality, her own soul from being thrown away as if it were unimportant and discardable. The problem, however, is that Soraya cannot simply try to avoid the impositions of the Arab culture by getting immersed in the American one, because, throughout the novel, she does not find herself entirely belonging to this culture either. The complete freedom that she associates with America, and seems to believe that it is something possible to be conquered by assimilating American elements into her personality and behavior, unveils itself as an achievement which will never be fully possible.

Besides Soraya's dependence on men, another aspect in the novel which shows that this young woman's freedom and independence will never be fully achieved – not even in her beloved America – can be noticed through an episode in which she and her friend Walid become involved in a fight with ethnic motivations at a bar in the United States. Walid is Palestinian, just like Soraya, and went to the United States with a student visa, but soon went to a new category, according to Soraya: "Student Visa Who Made Friends With Americans. He went to technical school, and now he repairs copy machines and pretty much Works His Ass Off" (57). Still according to Soraya, Walid "tries to avoid the Arab community because they are too expensive to be around . . . Every Friday he goes not to pray, but instead goes to Samson's, three blocks from his apartment, and has four beers, *just enough to carry you away*" (57).

Therefore, Walid has some practical reasons to justify the distance he maintains from the Arab community, and this does not mean that he does not care about his origins. Once, when he was at a bar, the waiter asked him his name, and, after he said it, the waiter suggested calling him "Willy". Walid argued the following: "I learned your language, you can learn my name" (58). This is a good demonstration of Walid's

concern about his origins, despite the distance that he insists on maintaining. The previously mentioned fight in which Soraya and Walid get involved starts exactly because these two characters, in spite of their attempts to assimilate the American culture, care about their origins. Everything starts when Soraya and Walid go to a bar called “The Jack Knife,” described by Soraya as having a “white name, white customers, white neighborhood” (58). The two friends were speaking Arabic when one of the white customers approached them and said: “Speak English!”. Walid replied that they could speak what pleased them, which made the man become angry, and the whole confusion started: “‘Fucking Mexicans,’ said a back voice [sic] as soft as the eyes. ‘He thinks we’re Mexicans.’ We laughed, and Walid knew the soft man would be watching and would be thinking we were laughing at him and would not let it go” (58). Aware of the complicated situation that was probably about to start, Walid invited Soraya to leave the bar, but it was too late, since the man was already willing to offend and attack them.

The white man teased them by saying: “‘You speak English pretty good for a wetback. Just remember, this ain’t a Mexican joint. You go somewhere else to drink your *cervezas* and hang out with your *puta*’” (59). Here, the prejudice against immigrants becomes especially clear, since there is, according to the white customer, an implicit “law” that segregates people from different nationalities to some specific places. As it is shown, in that white bar with its white customers, the only language that is allowed is English and the only accepted nationality is American. The white man’s aggressiveness can be noticed specifically when he uses Spanish words – ‘*cerveza*’ and ‘*puta*’ – in order to show that he knows some aspects of the Mexican culture and *even* knows some Spanish words. However, this obviously limited and prejudiced knowledge only shows his lack of cultural awareness, but it is nevertheless used by him to prove that the white man has some authority over the issue and can speak against Mexicans

since he knows these people and their habits. Besides, calling Soraya a ‘puta’ expresses great disrespect, since he does not even know her, but immediately assumes that she is just another cheap girl, in an attempt to attack her and her friend, Walid.

All these remarks about Soraya and Walid being offended at a bar revolve around their being immigrants, but the remarks are specifically grounded on the white customer’s assumptions that they are Mexicans, and not Arabs. Therefore, a crucial point to be added to this analysis regards the fact that the white man does not even know how to distinguish different nationalities, and cannot distinguish Spanish from Arabic. Soraya gets especially angry when the man shouts “‘Fucking Mexicans!’”, and replies: “‘We’re not Mexicans! . . . We’re Americans.’” (59). It is interesting to notice that Soraya does not correct the man by saying that they are Arabs. Soraya says they were Americans because it is what she feels, since she has been living her entire life in that country, and, thus, believes that she is as American as everybody else. However, this is exactly what makes the man become angrier, since he does not accept that those immigrants consider themselves American people. Therefore, he starts to beat Walid while laughing, in a clear manifestation of xenophobia.

What comes after the aggression, when Walid is lying on the sidewalk, is even more outrageous than the events that happened inside the bar. Some police officers start asking Walid questions about what has just happened:

‘So they beat you up for being Mexican?’ the policewoman asked.  
‘We’re not Mexican.’ ‘You got beaten up for being Mexican and you’re not Mexican? What are you?’ ‘Palestinian.’ ‘Well you got off pretty lucky then.’ The policewoman was quite for a minute. ‘That jacket sure makes you look Mexican.’ (59-60)

The policewoman saying that Soraya and Walid were lucky because the man at the bar did not know they are Palestinians shows the strong prejudice against Arab people in the United States, even before the terrorist attack against the World Trade Center, in 2001, since the novel is set before this episode. The policewoman implies that if Walid was beaten up because he was thought to be a Mexican, something much worse could have happened to him if he had said he was a Palestinian.

Regarding the situation of Arabs in the United States, the Arab writer Nada Elia mentions that “the ‘othering’ and rejection of Arabs and Arab Americans is as old as this country as is the erroneous homogenization of all Arab Americans as Muslims” (155), emphasizing that, although the reactions against Arabs in the U.S. has increased after 2001, they had already been present a long time before it. Elia complements her argument by saying: “As it predates 9/11, this rejection cannot be attributed to the trauma of the terrorist attacks, and is quite clearly based in religious intolerance, the assumption that Arabs are irrevocably ‘other’ because they are Muslim, aliens in this Judeo-Christian culture” (156). Thus, if today many people rely on the “trauma of terrorist attacks” as a justification for being hostile to “men with Middle-Eastern features” (Elia 156), before 2001 their actions against Arabs could not be validated by even the clumsiest excuses.

In the novel, therefore, according to the police officer, if Mexicans are really hated by some Americans, Palestinians occupy even a worse position in the United States, and the opinion of this character resonates what Elia presents as being the reasons why Arabs have always been rejected in the U.S. Besides, instead of protecting Soraya and Walid, who are American citizens, and, thus, have the right to be protected, the policewoman acts like the ignorant American man who was at the bar, perpetuating prejudices. Instead of taking practical actions against the aggressors, the policewoman

reinforces stereotypes, by mentioning, for instance, that wearing a jacket influences the way people from different ethnicities are viewed and treated.

This episode triggers in Soraya a moment of reflection through which she becomes aware that the American dream may exist for other people, but not for her, and not for immigrants, in general. She says:

Sneak back home, heart still pounding hours later, with rage, with hate.  
 What loser morons and, squeezing tears out, wishing it was one of those  
 American movies where Walid would knock those guys to the floor and  
 we would walk off without a scratch, my heroic prince defending my  
 honor... but that's not what the American movie would show, would it?  
 Instead it would show the super American guy knocking the scummy  
 Arab flat on the ground, like what happened. (60)

Thus, the American fantasy with its movies and superheroes inhabits Soraya's imaginary. However, this time, the American dream is not surrounded by glamour and by a sense of belonging, as it might have been before, but, rather, Soraya is aware that this fantasy does not involve her.

As Soraya says, in the American movies and pop culture, in general, plots are never favorable to minorities, and the presence of such characters in the mainstream storylines tends to be restricted to unexpressive roles or to villains that must be combated. Elia goes beyond this by saying that this problem is even more focused on Arabs than on other minorities. She argues that

Rejection takes on both overt and covert forms. The overt ones need no elaboration. One of the more insidious covert forms of rejection has been the systematic erasure of Arab Americans from the "American" consciousness. Arab Americans are officially erased from American

political discourse and representation; they do not exist as a recognized minority group. Until September 11, 2001, Muslim and Arab Americans were also erased from American popular culture. They were completely absent from “progressive” discourse. From the PBS children’s television program *Sesame Street*, to the groundbreaking feminist anthology *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Moraga and Anzaldúa 1983), the discourse of multiculturalism, which claims to represent the wide array of diversity in the United States, excluded Arab Americans. In the nonprogressive media, whenever Muslims were represented, they invariably appeared in the role of villains – and always as foreigners – Arabs, not Arab Americans. (156)

Thus, not even the “progressive discourse”, which is the one engaged in deconstructing hegemonic representations, gives attention to the Arabs, differently from what happened to other minorities. Opposed to this invisibility, but certainly not less harmful, is the representation of Arabs by the “nonprogressive media”, showing them as disreputable people – and it is this image that Soraya also sees when watching American cartoons and TV programs.

Soraya would like to see herself represented in the American fictional world, but this episode makes her perceive that this will not happen because she will never be seen or treated as an American girl. She thinks to herself:

Still wishing... that I were a superhero like in those cartoons where she comes in and wipes out the bad guys and still looks great. But there aren’t any Arab ones, are there? My hair is too dark, too thick; my skin is too far away from white to let me even pretend to be an American superhero. (60)



Thus, if Soraya once seemed happy and comfortable among the American people, and if she was once glad for satisfying their craving for stereotyped Arab stories, now she feels the burden of being an Arab girl in the United States. Her physical features, which were once a reason for her to be proud (“Some of the girls are jealous of me because I am like a woman . . . Not to mention that I am exotic” (30)), are now indelible marks that prevent her from joining the American dream for which she has always longed so much.

Soraya’s physical features, then, are one of the barriers that will never be completely surmounted in the girl’s search for assimilation. After mentioning her thick hair and dark skin for the first time, Soraya goes back to the subject several pages ahead, which shows the importance she attributes to its influence on the way she is perceived in the United States. She argues: “Some people can’t hide who they are, can’t lie and paint a prettier picture, because who they are is smeared on their faces. I can’t pretend I’m fourth-generation Italian-American because my hairs are too thick and my eyes dance too much” (115). Therefore, the fact that one cannot pass as someone or something else and be completely successful in one’s attempts is now unquestionable for Soraya.

While reflecting on this issue of pretending to be a different person, the adjective ‘smeared’, which means that something has been stained, spotted or made dirty, is used by her to refer to some people’s true personality. Thus, when saying that people with strong ethnic traits, such as the Arabs, cannot “paint a prettier picture” because “who they are is *smeared* on their faces”, Soraya relates these people’s true characteristics with a negative connotation: a stain that can never be removed and, consequently, prevents them from being entirely incorporated into the American community. Besides, by mentioning that she cannot pretend to be Italian-American, Soraya is not merely

giving a disinterested example, but rather, she is indicating a group of immigrants that is much more integrated to the American community and is much more accepted in the United States than the group of Arab-Americans.

Soraya's awareness of her own situation in the United States reaches its highest point in the final pages of the novel, when she admits, for the first time in the whole novel, that she would like to be in Palestine. She thinks to herself:

Springtime ache lasted too long this year and brought pictures of hillsides dotted with white and yellow and quiet, which I can just barely conjure up thanks to the damn lawn mower. *Who would think I would want to go back, just to watch my grandmother watching the day that sits slow and fat like a watermelon, watch the sky watching us, beg for the sun to cover us quietly.* (189)

Although Soraya does not mention it clearly, these “hillsides dotted with white and yellow and quiet” are most probably the setting of her Palestinian village, both because of its geophysical descriptions and because of the context of memories in which she inserts this scenario. It is possible to see that Soraya is bothered by the fact that she cannot have full recollections of her past and she blames this on the “damn lawn mower”.

However, because of all the real distance that exists between the girl and her homeland, since she left it at a very young age, she would still have problems in remembering her past, even if the noise at the garden did not exist. Soraya is impatient with the absence of memories, because she is now aware that she does not fit in the United States. Since she has noticed that her desire to assimilate will always be an unfulfilled one, Soraya, now, feels the need to resort to her past, willing to find something that will make her feel she belongs to a place and to a community. Thus, if

Soraya had once called her village “boring little Nawara” (28), all she wants now is to go back and observe the days passing calmly and slowly.

In fact, throughout the novel, Soraya tells some stories related to the Arab community, and even though most of them are related to Arabs in the United States, this shows her connection to the community. When she narrates stories of her people, she gets in contact with the collective memory of her community, and she reshapes her identity, because, as Pollak states, “*memory is a component of the feeling of identity, both individual and collective, to the extent that it is also an extremely important factor in the feeling of continuity and coherence of a person or a group in its reconstruction of itself*” (204).<sup>5</sup> Through the stories she tells, Soraya builds bonds with the Arab community which did not seem to exist, and, different from Khadija, and despite her previous attempts to assimilate, she, at times, feels somehow integrated to the Arab community.

However, the integration Soraya feels sometimes and the fact that she would like, at least for a moment, to go back to Palestine does not mean that she has suddenly become comfortable with Arab rules and traditions, since they continue to afflict her mind, that is now filled up with confusion and feelings of loss and displacement:

Worn out before anything has really started. *You are nothing without your virginity.* Lost in somewhere you grew up in, with a language you have taken, with a world that you want, but which is behind that clear steel curtain. *Watch it. Watch it all you want, but it will never be yours.*

(189)

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<sup>5</sup> “*a memória é um elemento constituinte do sentimento de identidade, tanto individual como coletiva, na medida em que ela é também um fator extremamente importante do sentimento de continuidade e de coerência de uma pessoa ou de um grupo em sua reconstrução de si*” (204).

In this passage, the sentences in italics might represent the voices of people who have advised her both about the importance of her virginity in the context of the Arab culture, and also about the impossibility of her fully belonging to the United States. Therefore, neither the thoughts related to the Arab world nor to the American one provide Soraya with the comfort and relief for which she longs. If on the one hand Soraya is scared about the Arab rules and afraid of her future as an Arab wife and mother, on the other, she is also extremely frustrated for not being able to reach what, in her opinion, is rightfully hers, since the United States is the place where she grew up and the English language is now her own language. Moreover, it is important to analyze the metaphor of the “clear steel curtain” used in this passage, because it accurately shows the relation between Soraya and America – and everything it represents. Although both sides are separated by a *clear* curtain, that is, Soraya can perfectly see what there is beyond this curtain, it is also made of steel, which means that she can never actually reach and touch what she sees, because this hard and strong barrier will always prevent her from completely crossing borders and fully going to the other side.

Thus, Soraya’s characterization as a diasporic subject goes from her desire for assimilation (although she cannot be considered really a diasporic subject at this first moment, this desire influences the shaping of her oncoming diasporic identity), passing through the realization that this is something impossible to be completely achieved, and finally getting to a feeling of displacement and loss in the midst of the Arab and the American different realities. However, even if the most prominent tone of Soraya’s narrative ends up being of loss and confusion, it is important to emphasize that multiple possibilities of performing her identity are available for this character. Even though these possibilities do exist for her, it does not mean that she actually chooses them, since she does not seem to be aware of them. Thus, one could not consider that Soraya

achieves agency, if Friedman's conceptualizations about the issue are at stake, because, by agency, Friedman does not mean "autonomy or freedom to act but rather the assumption of human subjectivities that create meanings and act in negotiation with the systemic conditions of the social order, however circumscribed" (Friedman, *Mappings* 90). Since, as I emphasized throughout this dissertation, Soraya acts for the sake of being free and autonomous, without much awareness of the political consequences of her actions, then she supposedly does not perform agency, in Friedman's terms.

The critic continues to emphasize the difference between agency and freedom.

As she states:

The geography I advocate refuses victimology and assumes agency on all sides in the zones of encounter – not autonomy, or the freedom to act unimpeded by others, but rather agency, the drive to name one's collective and individual identity and to negotiate the conditions of history, no matter how harsh. (Friedman, "Periodizing Modernism" 428)

Once again, Friedman argues that agency is not the same as acting freely, merely defying rules and other people. Thus, according to her, agency cannot exist without awareness and without a conscious negotiation. Even though Soraya, at times, criticizes some aspects of the Arab culture, her actions are mostly guided by a desire to be free and to defy her family, which would distance Soraya from agency. However, since Soraya is still a teenager, it is impossible to expect her to have full awareness of her actions and decisions, because these elements can only be achieved as time goes by, and as individuals become more mature. Thus, even though, in Friedman's point of view, Soraya would not be considered as having agency, I consider that she has it within the limits of her age and lack of maturity. Soraya certainly exercises her freedom and autonomy, and this freedom obviously opens possibilities for her to achieve agency

some day, when her actions become more political, based on an underlining awareness and desire to consciously negotiate and make changes.

### **3. Remembering the Ones Left Behind: Mawal as a Counterpoint to the Diasporic Characters**

In *West of the Jordan*, only one out of the four narrator-characters has never been to the United States. Mawal was born in the little village of Nawara, in Palestine, and has never left this place. Therefore, differently from the other three narrator-characters, she is not considered a diasporic subject. The simplest and perhaps most obvious decision when writing an analysis about diasporic characters would be, consequently, to ignore the presence of Mawal in the novel, or to mention her existence only a few times, and probably always in relation to the other three characters, throughout the analyses of these other characters. However, Mawal is an extremely rich character in the novel, since one can draw, from her, multiple insights both about diaspora and gender.

The analysis of this character in the present dissertation, thus, is crucial to the understanding of the ways in which issues of diaspora operate in *West of the Jordan*, because it sheds light on the diasporic conditions of the other three narrator-characters of the novel. Mawal's experiences in Palestine and her perceptions about people who leave their homeland – mostly to go to the United States – offer a unique perspective upon those involved in diasporic contexts, since they allow us to have a view of diaspora that is not grounded on those who leave only, but also on those who stay home. Therefore, in the novel, Mawal works as a counterpoint to her cousins, highlighting the differences that exist between diasporic subjects and those that they leave behind.

Another reason why I chose to include Mawal on this dissertation, bestowing her with the same amount of attention of the other three characters, regards the fact that one of the main objectives of this work is to offer a discussion about the heterogeneity found

in the fictional representation of Arab women characters. Concerning this objective, an important issue which will be exposed in the present work is related to the fact that when Mawal chooses to be loyal to the Arab culture she is not necessarily choosing submission in detriment of liberation. Her strong connection with her mother, for instance, shows that she is comfortable with her Arabness, and, especially when they join each other in order to listen to other Arab women's stories and secrets, it is clear that Mawal does not live a completely obedient life, but rather, she is empowered and helps to empower these women by creating networks of solidarity and empathy among them, through the process of listening and narrating stories. Consequently, issues of gender related to Mawal and to other Arab characters of the novel who stay in Palestine and who have a connection with her will also be discussed.

The differences between Mawal and her cousins can be noticed in several passages of *West of the Jordan*, and although Mawal is not actively involved in many episodes of the novel, her greatest contributions are related to the insights and thoughts she develops throughout the story. For instance, at the very beginning of the second chapter, entitled "Nawara," Mawal highly praises her village, by using an inspiring imagery: "Our village is called Nawara, which means flowers or blossoms. When you say it, Naw-waar-a, a hillside of small white wildflowers comes to mind, or the fragrant new blossoms on an orange or almond tree" (15).

Through this quotation, two huge differences between Mawal and her cousins, especially Khadija and Soraya, can be noticed. Firstly, Mawal emphasizes the Arabic pronunciation of her village's name, very carefully articulating every syllable of the word "Naw-waar-a," and creating a lyrical imagery to accompany this word. In opposition to this, it is possible to see Khadija having troubles with the pronunciation of her Arab name in America, which frequently sounds "like someone throwing up of



falling off a bicycle” (36), as I discussed earlier in reference to this same quotation. Thus, different from Mawal, the Arabic language does not sound beautiful and poetic for Khadija; instead, it is a source of discomfort and embarrassment for her.

The second difference that can be noticed through this passage lies in the fact that, while Soraya refers to her hometown as “boring little Nawara” (28), we see Mawal ennobling it, by associating it with merely beautiful and positive images, and ignoring any possibly boring aspects of the village. Also, she underscores the traditions and unique aspects inherent to the place:

Our village is an island, famous for beautiful embroidered dresses that we call *rozās* while most everyone else calls them *thobes*, and yet surrounded by villages that do not embroider at all. The complicated embroidery on our *rozās* – with both Palestinian and western stitches and patterns – captures the spirit of Nawara. (15)

Mawal emphasizes what her village is famous for and she is proud to mention the specialness and uniqueness of the tradition of the embroidered *rozās*, by stating that the pattern of the dresses is a complicated one and that none of the villages that surround Nawara have a tradition like that one. Such pride – both of Nawara and its traditions – is never manifested by her cousins Soraya and Khadija, for reasons that will be fully explained and developed further on in this dissertation.

The embroidered dresses, which are exactly what Mawal chooses as a symbol of Nawara, are, in fact, a big part of an effort made by Palestinian heritage institutions to strengthen the traditions of Palestine as well as its national expression. During the first Intifada, for instance, embroidered dresses became a symbol of national resistance and “the colors of the Palestinian flag, and the word ‘Palestine’ embroidered on garments and other items became popular symbols of their homeland and national identity” (Saca

39). Despite the fact that the manufacturing of these items with explicit nationalist details has recently declined, embroidered dresses are still an expression of national identity and a way to keep Palestinian traditions alive (Saca 40). Mawal knows and values this, differently from her cousins Soraya and Khadija, who, most of the times, do not even seem to be aware of the existence of such meaningful traditions.

Still regarding the tradition of *rozás*, they occupy such an important position in Mawal's life that she associates their production with the secrets of Nawara's women, which she hears very often and which are a fundamental part of her life. She mentions that she "will keep them [the secrets] safe and do no more than stitch them into the fabric of our *rozás*" (17). Therefore, Mawal implies that the *rozás* are an indirect expression of those women's stories and secrets, confirming that their identities are inserted in this tradition. Also, Mawal, after listening to one of the women's stories, employs the verb 'to stitch'— a word that belongs to the semantic field of embroidery — repeatedly. She says, "Stitch in red for life. Stitch in green to remember. Stitch, stitch to never forget" (103). It is possible to see, then, that Mawal intimately relates, once again, this specific tradition to the women's stories and lives. Furthermore, the colors employed in this metaphor are very significant: red is traditionally known as the color of life and vitality, while green "is the color most often identified with Islam. It was Muhammad's favorite color (the color of his turban) and is often the color of flags of Muslim nations" (Robinson and Rodrigues 123). Thus, Mawal clearly associates the stories to which she listens and the memories of her place with the traditions and characteristics of the Palestinian beliefs.

Besides the worship of the Palestinian traditions, another aspect that makes Mawal's perceptions different from those of her cousins is related to the impressions she has about the United States. In Mawal's point of view, this country "is like an army

calling all able-bodied young men away and then never returning the bodies” (15). By using a war metaphor to express how she feels about so many Palestinian people leaving their homes in order to go to the United States, Mawal makes it clear that she sees the United States as a voracious country which violently steals the Arab people from their home, leaving mothers and wives “grieving over the evils that country has introduced their sons to, like drugs and drinking and loose women and gambling” (15). Mawal’s hybrid cousins cannot grasp this nuance of diaspora in the same manner that she can, since they are the ones who *leave* emptiness in their homelands, and not the ones who stay and *feel* this emptiness. Therefore, Mawal is the only narrator-character who, throughout the novel, shows empathy for those in Nawara who lost beloved people to the United States.

Here, the development of the relation between Mawal and the United States, as well as her relation with her relatives who have moved to this country, is of great importance to the understanding of diaspora issues in the novel. Although she is not a diasporic subject, since this definition is applied to those people who, as it was stated earlier in this dissertation, leave their homelands and become “marked by hybridity and heterogeneity – cultural, linguistic, ethnic, national – and . . . are defined by a traversal of the boundaries demarcating nation and diaspora,” (Brazier and Mannur 5) Mawal is indirectly involved in the diasporic process of her people, representing those individuals who are said to “stay put”. It is important to point out that the context in which I choose to use the expression “to stay put” is different from the context in which Brah uses it. By “staying put”, Brah means those people who are indigenous in the host country. I, on the other hand, use it to refer to individuals who belong to a diasporic community, but who stay in their homelands and watch their fellow citizens participate in their diasporic journeys.

This meaning of “staying put” that differs from Brah’s conceptualizations is found in the book *New diasporas: the mass exodus, dispersal and regrouping of migrant communities*, written by Nicholas van Hear. The author uses the term “staying put” “to cover those who do not or cannot migrate” (44) and he admits that, at first, the inclusion of this group of people in diaspora discussions may seem odd. However, he justifies it by claiming that

those who stay put . . . are an essential element in a migration order. Those who stay may service or support migrants abroad, especially in the period immediately after departure, or they may be serviced or supported by the migrant members of their communities, particularly after such members become established abroad. (44)

Therefore, it is impossible to have an accurate and thorough discussion about diasporic individuals if those who stay put in their homelands are ignored. The reasons that Van Hear presents are all very important because they highlight the relationship between the person who leaves and the one stays behind, and, as stated by him above, this relationship is often based on mutual dependence and assistance.

In fact, these bonds often present such configurations, and the existent dependence is commonly grounded on financial issues. In *West of the Jordan*, for instance, there are several passages in which this relationship becomes explicit, such as when Mawal mentions that one uncle of hers who lives in the United States, Haydar, often sends money (137). Also, Mawal mentions, in another passage, that money is “the good that has come from all the leaving” (96). However, I claim that the reasons that Van Hear develops are not the only reasons why the presence of those who stay put is crucial to the comprehension of diaspora issues. It is important to point out that the relationship of dependence that he defends is not always present, and the fact that it

might not exist sometimes does not mean that people who stay put need to be excluded from the diasporic process in these cases, since there are reasons, other than financial necessity and dependence, that make their inclusion crucial.

Those who stay put need to be taken into consideration because they are, very often, emotionally affected by the absence of a great number of people who used to be part of their daily lives – and here not only friends and families are included, but also acquaintances and other members of the community – and, the emptiness caused by their leaving certainly has influences on the building of their identities. Diasporic movements produce so many marks on people who stay and influence them in so many ways that their exclusion from diasporic processes becomes extremely inconsiderate to the changes that occur in these people's lives. Therefore, their reactions, be they excitement, curiosity, envy, sadness or any other, must be analyzed. The same path is also true for those who leave: the ways in which they relate to people who were left behind and their feelings and reactions towards them need to be taken into consideration, and cannot be reduced to the financial bonds that are established between them.

For these reasons, I claim that Brah's conceptualizations regarding what she calls "diaspora space" should be extended in order to include those people who belong to diasporic communities but do not migrate, based on Van Hear's discussions presented above. Brah argues that diaspora space

is the point at which boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, of belonging and otherness, of 'us' and 'them', are contested. My argument is that diaspora space as a concept is 'inhabited', not only by those who have migrated and their descendents, but equally by those who are constructed and represented as indigenous. In other words, the concept of *diaspora*

*space* (as opposed to that of diaspora) includes the entanglement, the intertwining of the genealogies of dispersion with those of 'staying put'. The diaspora space is the site where *the native is as much a diasporian as the diasporian is the native.* (209)

Therefore, according to Brah, this diaspora space is a space of interaction between the immigrant and the native, or the person who inhabits the host country -- and I will add that certainly the immigrant is influenced by those left in the place of origin. It is extremely important to consider the relations between these groups of individuals, since it is in this diaspora space that the interactions between them happen and it is within this space that the borders between them become problematic, in the sense that negotiations need to take place all the time.

Moreover, the extended concept of diaspora space is of great importance because it shows that the individuals in diaspora are not the only ones to be affected, since those people who receive them in their host country are also extremely affected by their presence and by the interactions that happen between them. If diaspora space is where influences and affections are constantly exchanged between all subjects involved, I claim that this space is also inhabited by those people who stay in their homelands while their fellow citizens migrate to other places, since they affect and are affected by diasporic processes, together with the immigrants and with the individuals from the host country.

Mawal, as a character that stays put in her homeland, is a good example of how this extended concept of diaspora space works. Mawal's feelings towards the United States are contradictory and range from anger to curiosity and sympathy. Besides mentioning that she sees the United States as an army (15), as it was pointed out above, Mawal also underlines her resistance to this country in other passages of the novel. For

instance, Mawal openly expresses her disapproval to so many people moving from Nawara to the United States. She says, “You would think our village is in love with America with all the people who have left, like America is the best relative in the world that everyone has to visit. America is more like a greedy neighbor who takes the best out of you and leaves you feeling empty” (96). Mawal feels disappointed with the fact that everyone has to go to America and nobody seems to understand something that for her is crystal clear.

Also, by mentioning that the United States is more appropriately associated with a neighbor than with a relative, Mawal implies that the United States and her homeland do not have connections strong enough to be called relatives, and, thus, the use of the word “neighbor” would be much more accurate, since it expresses the lack of firm ties between the two countries. At the same time, Mawal notices some closeness between them, and she chooses to call America a “neighbor” despite the great geographic distance that separates the two places. Therefore, even though she has considerable restraints regarding America, she acknowledges that this country is unavoidably related to Palestine and that they occupy proximate spaces in the diaspora process.

Diaspora space, being a complex site of negotiation and mixed feelings and reactions, fills up with interest and curiosity those who stay put. Mawal mentions, for instance, that she “want[s] to visit the States one day and see the life all of my [her] cousins are leading that I [she] hear[s] about so much” (17). The information she gets about her cousins come to her, mostly, through the videotapes they send to the family left behind, and it is through these videotapes that she becomes amused by some aspects of her cousins’ lives. Mawal admits that she loves to “watch new fashions and accents” of whom she calls her “American cousins” (19). However, it is important to highlight that, in spite of her excitement, throughout the novel Mawal never expresses a wish of

being like her cousins.

Another passage which shows Mawal's excitement about America happens when her uncle, Hamdi, who has been living in the United States for many years, goes back to Nawara for a visit. During the days that precede his arrival, Mawal cannot stop thinking about the American gift that he would probably bring to her. About her eagerness, Mawal says: "The thoughts stayed there in my head. Big fat thoughts... a beautiful plastic doll with long legs and long yellow hair, a fancy dress I could wear to weddings, a fancy American toy that did tricks – it really didn't matter. I was sure it would be wonderful" (138). Interestingly enough, the gifts about which she fantasizes contain American features: the plastic doll that has the characteristics of a Barbie – the most famous and stereotyped American toy for girls, and banned in several Middle-Eastern countries (Zoepf) –, a sophisticated dress that most probably would not even resemble the traditional *rozās*, a toy with special devices – which probably, in her mind, is related to American technology. Also, the fact that any gift would be wonderful is not related to children's common enthusiasm with toys only, but it is also related to these toys being different and being from America.

The days when her uncle, Hamdi, and his American wife, Fay, spent in Nawara were thrilling for Mawal. About the day when they arrive in Nawara, she says: "This day was so nice, filled with food and stories and shyness and English. Fay sat next to me when she could . . . It was strange having our house filled with a language I didn't understand" (140). The presence of Fay made Mawal shy, because, according to her, she had never been in the presence of an American before and she felt intimidated close to Fay's "smooth, white face" (140). This shyness that Mawal felt was probably due to all the expectations and speculations she used to cultivate about America, and, meeting Aunt Fay, for Mawal, was somehow like getting closer than ever to the American



world. Therefore, this passage is another illustration of how the contact and the interactions between those who stay put and those who leave their homelands are meaningful and remarkable for the individuals involved in diaspora space, including those who stay put.

Despite these moments of interest and delight that Mawal feels towards America, what prevails in the novel is her feeling that her family and acquaintances would lead better lives if they had stayed in their homeland. If the anger that she sometimes expresses against America, as shown before, is somehow counterpoised by the curiosity and interest that Mawal cultivates for that country, her feeling that Palestinian immigrants are in the wrong place is something that, for her, cannot be attenuated. According to her, “most of the young men in Nawara who went abroad went to America, some to study but most to work in any kind of job they could find. I know they missed the smell of coffee brewing, missed the clean air of their land, longed for the gentle touch of their mothers” (98). Although Mawal has never left Nawara, she is able to put herself in the position of the immigrants, and so she wonders that nostalgia must be a strong component of their experience as diasporic subjects, maybe, especially, because she cannot imagine herself living away from her homeland, with its characteristic smells and colors.

Also, there is a moment in the novel when, after listening to one of her grandmother’s stories, Mawal says that these stories are a privilege of those who stay at their homelands. After saying that she would like to stitch these stories into her skin, she wonders: “Are there stories like this in lovely, tempting America? Do my cousins there even know these little histories? I doubt it” (103). Therefore, although Mawal manifests interest in the American culture, as mentioned before, in her mind, America, tempting as it may seem and with many attractions as it may have, will never be on equal terms to

what Nawara has to offer for its people: stories, fresh air, maternal touches... Mawal, thus, feels sorry for those people who had to leave Nawara, and she feels comfortable with the fact that she stayed there and does not wish she were somewhere else.

In fact, this is an issue in the novel that might generate some controversial analysis and diverging points of view. The fact that Mawal stays in her homeland and thinks she is in better conditions than those who leave may be interpreted, by some critics, as a symptom of Palestinian women's absence of free will and of constraints related to Arab women. Therefore, in order to clarify these issues, it is fundamental, here, to take gender issues into consideration and to analyze the character Mawal through these lenses.

Abdelrazek, in her essay about the four narrator characters in *West of the Jordan*, sees Mawal as experiencing displacement just like her cousins, with the difference that she is "homeless and displaced at home" (127). According to Abdelrazek, this occurs because Mawal is constrained by the "gendered patriarchy and colonizing Israeli occupation" (127). The critic states that Mawal is confined to Nawara, since she cannot leave this place unless she is accompanied by a husband, and therefore she feels "displaced and uprooted" (127). However, this statement the critic makes can be counterargued, since there are no substantial textual evidences in the novel that enable one to prove that Mawal feels out of place in her homeland. Actually, Abdelrazek herself does not present any passages from the book that endorse her hypothesis. There are, on the other hand, excerpts from the novel which show that Mawal is connected to her homeland and does not seem to be displaced living there. As previously shown, Mawal feels sorry for those Arab immigrants who cannot be in Nawara participating of what this culture has to offer. Also, throughout the story, Mawal never expresses the wish to live somewhere else and the way she portrays Nawara is very poetic and filled

with affection for this place, which in fact seems very special by the way she describes it.

Regarding her cultural environment, Mawal feels part of it and this integration can be seen, for instance, in the way she praises and values the tradition of producing *rozas*, as it was explored in the previous pages of this dissertation. Also, Mawal mentions that she would not like to get married to one of those Palestinian men who go to the United States and then return to Nawara completely modified. She declares: “I am not marrying one of those guys who left here when he was a teenager and has been living an American life ever since. I’ve seen their arrogance and I’ve heard their stories” (17). Thus, Mawal does not want to incorporate the acculturated American way of life to the family that she will raise someday and she is fonder of men who cultivate the Palestinian traditions.

Therefore, if Mawal really felt uprooted in Nawara, as Abdelrazek defends, her bonds to her culture would be much weaker than they actually are, similarly to what happens to her cousins. What seems to occur with Mawal is exactly the opposite: she remains faithful to her roots, strongly holding on to her culture, and the fact that she lives in an environment characterized by so many individuals being withdrawn from their homelands and cultures only contributes to her attachment to native roots, as a way of strengthening and not letting traditions die.

As for the political aspects, Abdelrazek believes that one of the reasons of the supposed displacement that Mawal feels in the novel is the fact that Palestinians are stateless people and “they have few freedoms in their own country” (127) since the Arab-Israeli war, in 1948, and the Israeli occupation, in 1967. According to the critic, this, per se, would be evidence strong enough of Mawal’s sense of uprootedness and displacement. It is true that political events as meaningful as those cannot be ignored

and it is clear that they have highly affected the lives of Palestinian people. However, what needs to be highlighted is that, in the novel, Mawal seems to be living a fairly normal life and the character never mentions the Israeli occupation or privations derived from this, except for a moment, when she is describing her village. She says that Nawara “sits at the top of the West Bank, just west of the Jordan River, east of Jenin and far enough away from both of these places to be a peaceful village that only every so often releases an avalanche of stones and fire” (15). Nawara is obviously not free from the conflicts generated by the Israeli occupation, and Mawal knows this, but as she says, Nawara still remains a peaceful village. Thus, it is very important to consider the exact location of Nawara as well as the situation of the place in order to avoid misinterpretations, because, although the circumstances are indeed extremely problematic in some Palestinian localities, and might generate displacement among the individuals, in Mawal’s village, and, most importantly, according to the character’s point of view, this does not seem to provoke in her a sense of disconnectedness.

It is also worth noting that immediately after Mawal gives an account of the present conditions of Nawara, she starts talking about the great number of people from her village who go to the United States. Therefore, before she gets to dedicate more attention to the occupation of Palestine, Mawal starts to be concerned, once again, with the many women who are left behind by their husbands and sons, as well as the situation – very often problematic – in which the immigrants live in America. Thus, Mawal’s thoughts are more often occupied by diaspora issues than by the Israeli presence in her village.

Regarding gender issues, Abdelrazek is indeed very accurate when she states that “the history of the subjugation of Arab women still affects the lives of those Arab women who live in the Arab world and in the diaspora” (127). Throughout Mawal’s

story, there are many excerpts that show how women still have to face many problems in the Arab world and how, in many cases, their role as women is expected to be performed in accordance to conservative traditions that many times end up limiting these women and making their lives hard. Mawal is a character that figures as a good starting point for gender analysis and interpretations, not only because she is an Arab girl living in the Arab world, but also because she listens very attentively to the testimonies of many other Arab women.

One of the stories to which Mawal listens, that of Farah, presents an example of the tough situations that Palestinian women very often undergo. When she was still sixteen years old, Farah used to be in an abusive marriage with an older husband “who gave her two children and fists that pounded her with welts to cover her body, welts she ignored or covered” (51). Dealing with aggressive men is a burden that, unfortunately, is part of a great number of women’s lives in many societies all over the world. However, while in many of these societies women have laws that protect them against violence and they have a chance to speak against it, in Arab societies it is difficult for women to have a chance to escape from it, since “currently there is no specific regulation criminalizing domestic violence” (Rought-Brooks, Duaibis and Hussein 130).

Rought-Brooks, Duaibis and Hussein, in an article about the different kinds of violence of which Palestinian women are victims, state that they generally do not denounce husbands who beat them because of the existence of some “discriminatory laws that condone and perpetuate such violence and [because of] the virtual absence of institutionalized policies to prevent violence, assist victims, and hold perpetrators accountable” (128). Therefore, Palestinian women know that officially denouncing their husbands will not stop domestic violence, since the law is generally not on their side.

Besides, these women are sometimes ashamed of speaking out, because they know that in their culture, they are responsible for keeping the harmony in their families and for caring for their homes, and consequently, they “remain silent to protect their families’ reputations and ‘honor’” (128). Besides these barriers that prevent Palestinian women from fighting against domestic violence, Rought-Brooks, Duaibis and Hussein also point out other problems that women have to face:

if a girl wants to file a complaint for violence or abuse, the complaint must be filed by a male relative . . . Women may be able to file charges against their husbands or families for assault but these cases rarely reach the courts and police often refuse to come to the aid of women, because, as in many jurisdictions, domestic violence is treated as a family problem. (130)

Impunity, thus, is a characteristic that perpetuates domestic violence in Palestine, and even if women have the support of a male relative, as it is officially required, their situation will probably not be changed. In *West of the Jordan*, Farah, for instance, has her father’s support, after he finds out about her husband’s constantly beating her, and he makes his son-in-law grant his daughter with divorce. Despite this, she sees nothing but a wall in front of her, since “there is no freedom for a divorced woman with two children” (51). Therefore, besides having to deal with the impunity of their husbands, Palestinian women have to deal with the fact that if they manage to get divorced, they will not be seen with respectful eyes, and will suffer the consequences of not enduring a miserable life by the side of their husbands.

Still regarding Farah’s story, another point of the patriarchy of the Arab culture which is exposed has to do with men wanting their wives to be pure and submissive, while they treat them very badly and cultivate stories that are based on hypocrisies.

Farah tells Mawal and her mother that, once, she was traveling and heard a man talking about his years in America. He was married to a Puerto Rican woman who did not fit his expectations of a good wife, and so he left her in America and went back to Palestine, where he is now married to “a beautiful young wife who is Muslim and virtuous” (52). Even before he says this, Farah somehow anticipates his words in her mind, and ironically thinks: “and you came home and married a virgin in the name of God” (52). The fact that Farah knew what this man’s hypocrite expectations were is a sign that Arab women, most of the times, are aware of the role that men want them to play.

Farah goes on inevitably comparing this man she met to her first husband, since both of them “wanted to go between the legs of a young virgin, to feel control after all those years of foreign prostitutes and cheap women” (52), and the worst is that they “would speak with God’s words spattered on top of [their] own and people thought [them] virtuous” (53). Therefore, not only would these abusive men speak supposedly backed by religion, but they would also be viewed by society as morally excellent, while women would, many times, have their reputations put at stake.

Another moment in the novel which shows that women are more valued by men in Arab societies when they are virtuous and chaste can be seen in the episode in which Mawal’s friend, Hanan, has an accident when she is riding Mawal’s new bicycle. After Hanan’s accident, Mawal describes that she has seen blood “on her pants in between her legs” (146). A few days later, when Hanan is already fine, Mawal mentions a peculiar fact about the accident. She says:

One funny thing was that her mother saved her bloody underpants and wrapped them in a newspaper from the day we had the accident ‘so when she gets married, she’ll have proof that she’s a girl,’ which I didn’t really

understand. ‘This means Hanan will be married very soon,’ my mother said, laughing. ‘Before she knows what she can do with her freedom’.

(148)

Here, once again, the importance of Arab women’s reputation and purity is made clear, and young girls, like Mawal, despite being aware of how they should behave, do not really know the reasons why it should be like this. In this episode of the bloody underpants, for instance, Mawal does not understand that they wrapped them in a newspaper in order to prove to Hanan’s future husband that she lost her virginity because of an accident, and not because she had sexual intercourse before marriage. The rules about how women should behave, therefore, are imposed on them without further explanations or justifications.

Therefore, the passage about Hanan's bicycle accident sheds light on the importance of women’s virginity to the notion of true Arab womanhood which is not only desirable, but also necessary for women to be seen as respectable and valuable. According to a research on Arab women guided by Nadine Naber, “virginity, followed by heterosexual (ethno-religious) endogamous marriage were the key demands of an idealized Arab womanhood that together, constituted the yardstick that policed female subjectivities in cultural nationalist terms” (92). In the Arab culture, virginity, as Naber mentions, serves as a way of regulating women, so that they do not have control over their bodies and their sexuality. Thus, the comment that Mawal's mother makes about Hanan getting married “before she knows what she can do with her freedom” shows that not being biologically a virgin anymore is associated with gaining freedom. Virginity, for Hanan, is now a feeble means of discipline, and this is the reason why another manner of controlling the girl needs to take place, and in this case, marriage is what will prevent Hanan from enjoying this supposed freedom.



Moreover, it is possible to see Mawal trapped in her parent's decisions about her future, because she is a girl and, therefore, she does not have full control of her life and plans. When she is talking about marriage, Mawal says that these plans are still far from happening, because she has other priorities that will take place before marriage does. She says: "I still have to finish high school, and then, if my parents will allow me, I want to go to college and become a teacher like Miss Maryam, who teaches English and Classical Arabic" (17). Mawal is aware that she depends on her parent's decision to complete her education and even to have a profession that is typically performed by women. Therefore, even when girls are not trying to challenge any gender roles, they need, first, to have their parent's approval. Also, what needs to be highlighted here is that Mawal is acquiescent to this situation and she does not even think about taking action in order to change her position.

Actually, there is a moment in the story in which Mawal, despite not *doing* anything that opposes the role of an obedient girl and daughter, has some thoughts that show she would like to cause some trouble at times. She declares:

And now, as summer begins, I want to lie on my back and eat the sky. I want to be mischievous. I want to stare at Miss Maryam's large pointed breasts, to stand this much closer to the vegetable man who winks, to let him touch my hand when he gives me back my change. (19)

None of these things that Mawal wants to do are too bold or malicious, but, for her, these small acts are extremely meaningful and defiant, since they go against what she is instructed to do and against what society makes her believe is appropriate for girls. However, it is important to highlight that these transgressions are just thoughts and Mawal does not really put any of them into practice.

In fact, Mawal's thoughts are briefly interrupted by the memories of her mother

telling her that this is not right. She says:

My mother has led me to believe that feelings and thoughts such as these will take me straight to hell, or make me turn out like my untamed cousin Soraya, *who ate too much cereal when she was young and has the foolishness of an American in her blood*, and that may be true but I don't much care. I want to sit in the garden and hike my dress up to my knees so my legs can feel the sun as it kisses them. (19)

The italics in the quotation above indicate the voice of Mawal's mother present in her mind, and she blames Soraya's contact with the American culture for her supposed "foolishness". In fact, what Mawal's mother classifies as foolishness are the bold and transgressive acts that accompany Soraya, which will be explored in the next section of this dissertation. Therefore, in Mawal's mother's opinion, transgression and deviation from the norm are associated with the American culture and Mawal probably agrees with this, but at least for that moment, she does not care and she wants to silence her mother's voice in her mind in order to enjoy her desire for freedom.

Regarding gender, thus, Palestinian women still have to face many restrictions and confinements, and Mawal, in the novel, is a character who portrays these issues, through her own stories and especially through the stories of other female inhabitants from Nawara. The theorist Abdelrazek states that "women in Palestine are displaced by the gendered and political confinements imposed on them, which makes them endure tough conditions in silence" (137). By the evidences which were previously presented in this dissertation, it is clear that the Palestinian women represented in *West of the Jordan* really undergo much suffering. However, what needs to be emphasized is that there are other perspectives on this same issue and Palestinian women nowadays are becoming more active and finding new ways to express their womanhood.

Contrary to this alternative view about the situation of Arab women and still arguing that they are doomed to have extremely limited lives, Abdelrazek states that

Mawal tells her own story as a Palestinian girl through the tales of the different women of 'unfulfilled dreams,' revealing that under the present circumstances of Palestine in particular and the Arab women in general these represent the only possible stories for Arab girls/women. (136)

Believing that the stories to which Mawal listens represent the only possibilities for Palestinian women is harmful for these women and also for the understanding of their situation for two main reasons. First, because it entraps women in a position of eternal victims causing problems to their self-esteem and preventing them from doing anything, since according to this deterministic view, they are unavoidably doomed to fail. Second, and perhaps most important, this view does not correspond to the current reality in which a great number of Palestinian women find themselves. It is a view grounded on past events and past circumstances and which helps to perpetuate misconceptions and stereotypes about Arab women.

Moreover, when disseminating such ideas, one needs to be very careful in order not to impose ethnocentric ideas over a certain culture or people. Although, as it was previously shown, Palestinian women do suffer constraints related to gender, presenting them in a state of never-ending victimization implies that they are being viewed through western lenses which might distort their values and culture, automatically classifying them as freedomless and disempowered.

Instead of viewing the sad stories told by Arab woman as a representation of the only possibilities for Mawal and for other Arab girls in general, as Abdelrazek suggests, one could adopt another perspective. Rather than focusing specifically on the content of the stories heard by Mawal and her mother, which would unavoidably emphasize the

suffering and victimization of Arab women, one should focus on the moments in which the storytelling happens and on the network of solidarity that is built among the women involved in these passages. The simple fact that, in *West of the Jordan*, female characters have the opportunity of joining each other is, per se, extremely relevant, since connections and relationships are generated from these moments. Even more meaningful is the fact that these characters are reunited with the important purpose of sharing painful personal experiences. It is known that narrating difficult moments, or even traumatic experiences, and giving voice to contradictory emotions is fundamental in the process of dealing with memories and building bridges between past, present and future. According to Márcio Seligmann-Silva, a scholar deeply engaged in memory issues, the narration of events, especially the traumatic ones, is an “absolute necessity” (66). According to Seligmann-Silva, this narration, which he calls “testimony”, “presents itself as a condition for survival”<sup>6</sup> (66, my translation), and, therefore, in *West of the Jordan*, the women involved in the telling of their own experiences enjoy the opportunity of having their voices heard and of making room for a fundamental need that mainly aims at connecting individuals to the world once again, after they had undergone traumas (Seligmann-Silva 66).

Besides the need to narrate personal experiences for the sake of trying to overcome hardships, and also for the sake of leaving the domains of painful memories in order to be reintegrated to the group once again, oral narratives work as important instruments for preserving memories. Fernando Frochtengarten emphasizes the importance of oral memories:

The narrated past carries an opinion: a recollection is a perspective about

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<sup>6</sup> “Ele [o testemunho] se apresenta como condição absoluta de sobrevivência” (Seligmann-Silva 66).

what has been experienced. Through it, a memoirist is made visible to others. The art of narrating involves the coordination of the soul, of the voice, of the gaze, and of the hands. It is like a performance in which the word, associated with the action, allows one to show who one really is.<sup>7</sup>  
(372, my translation)

According to Frochtengarten, the narration of past experiences requires that the individual who is narrating chooses one of the many possible angles of seeing an event, prioritizing some facts and rejecting others, which emphasizes the constructional aspect of memories. Also, it is possible to notice that Frochtengarten considers the oral narration of memories as an opportunity that an individual has to position himself in relation to others and, thus, the moment of narration is an instant of full expression, when the individual has the opportunity to be seen – through all of one’s performative movements – and also to be heard.

Moreover, Frochtengarten states that the “oral memory stands against human isolation”, and “when a human being’s past inhabits the area shared by the narrator and the listener, it enters the regime of intelligibility of other men, coming closer to the past of the group”<sup>8</sup> (373, my translation). Therefore, according to Frochtengarten, oral memory promotes integration between the members of a community, approximating them, preventing their life stories and memories from being forgotten, and creating bonds of identification among them. Thus, in *West of the Jordan*, when Mawal and her

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<sup>7</sup> “O passado narrado carrega uma opinião: uma lembrança é uma perspectiva sobre o vivido. Por meio dela o memorialista aparece aos demais. A arte de narrar envolve a coordenação da alma, da voz, do olhar e das mãos. É como que uma performance em que a palavra, associada à ação, permite ao homem mostrar quem ele é” (Frochtengarten 372).

<sup>8</sup> “a memória oral levanta-se contra o isolamento humano. Quando habita o campo compartilhado por narrador e ouvinte, o passado de um homem ingressa no regime de inteligibilidade de outros homens, aproxima-se do passado do grupo” (Frochtengarten 373).

mother participate in the telling and listening of women's life stories and memories, they experience the process of social interaction, and instead of being confined to the domain of the home, solely dedicated to household chores and to the preservation of domestic harmony, they are making room for the experience of belonging to a group. This group, most importantly, is made up exclusively of women, who share female experiences and perceptions, distant from the male gaze and men's restrictions; this establishes the moments of oral history in the novel as moments of resistance and transgression for the female characters.

The stories told by Farah, which were already explored in this dissertation associated with gender and the Arab culture, constitute a good example of how this process of orally sharing memories among Arab women works as a strategy of transgression. Farah, in her everyday life, is not able to express her dissatisfaction with the kind of life she leads and, according to her, the only possible alternatives she has are to "accept God's will and teach [herself] rigidity" (49). However, throughout the passages in which she tells her stories to Mawal and her mother, Farah criticizes men and patriarchy in a way that she would probably never do in an environment other than the one in which the life stories are told.

For instance, Mawal, who is a mediator between the stories Farah tells her and the reader of the novel, mentions the former's feelings of indignation against her first husband. Despite having treated her very badly, he was considered, by society, a virtuous man, "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" (52). Farah's private reactions to the hardships she undergoes as a consequence of the patriarchal society in which she lives would probably not be known in a public environment, which makes the importance of these moments of storytelling explicit. Such importance is

mainly due to the creation of a sisterhood between women and to the fact that these moments are the ones in which they have the opportunity of making their voices be heard, without reprimands. The greatest effectiveness of this female bond is due to the fact that, only after it is created, are women able to move to the next step towards their empowerment. Obviously, this sisterhood, by itself, is not enough, but it is a crucial first step for women, and, without it, nothing else can be done, and no other actions can be put into practice.

Even when women who tell their stories to Mawal and her mother do not blatantly criticize men, or patriarchy, and just seem to be gossiping about other people's lives, instead of sharing their joys and pains, it is possible to see that, underneath words which may seem to be vain and shallow, there are life stories as well as the necessity of women uncovering themselves. For instance, Um Radwan goes to Mawal's house in order to report rumors she heard about the life of one of the Nawarese women, Um Lubna, who is a single mother and has a mentally disabled daughter, Lubna Aziz. Um Radwan displays a mixture of repulse and pity towards Lubna's condition, and even more so because the girl's mother is said to have been receiving men at her house, which is also the target of unmerciful comments made by Um Radwan.

At first, all of this may seem nothing more than idle talk; however, Um Radwan criticizes other people's lives as a way of not facing the fact that her own life is not immune from imperfections whatsoever. She criticizes other people's lives in order to conceal – even to herself – that her own life is full of problems. Hence, the content of Um Radwan's talks says much about her inner troubles and fears, and Mawal and her mother listening to what she has to tell them helps her to somehow release the burdens she carries with her, even though this is not done directly, as in the case of Farah. Also, there are times when Um Radwan is talking about superficial issues and she suddenly

manages to reveal some of her pains. For instance, there is a moment when she is telling Mawal and her mother about a European cardiologist with whom she had an appointment, and she starts talking about her heart aching, not literally, but metaphorically:

My heart often aches, though whether it is because of my dead son, may God have mercy on him, because of my other sons who all live in the United States, because of my difficult daughter, or because of sickness, I don't know. I am an old woman with no children or grandchildren here to care for or who will care for me. (69)

Here, once again, Mawal gets in contact with the anguish and loneliness that women who are left behind in the diasporic process undergo, which shows, one more time, that the consequences of diaspora constantly surround her. Besides this, as the quotation above states, Um Radwan benefits from the attention that Mawal and her mother dedicate to her, since she is able to express her sorrows, even though many times not directly, in an environment that is familiar and secure for her. The fact that Um Radwan is able to find some company and consideration when everything else, for her, is composed of feelings of abandonment and rejection, certainly makes her feel somehow stronger and more integrated to a group.

In *West of the Jordan*, the moments in which the Nawarese women share their memories and life stories are empowering for them, and especially for Mawal, who, as a listener of other women's stories, is a key element for their standing as individuals who do have a voice and a positioning. The women in the novel are only able to speak because Mawal and her mother are there to listen to them and to keep their confessions without offering judgmental words; therefore, she plays a crucial role in the network of solidarity that is created between women. In the novel, Mawal speaks on behalf of other



women, and, in the case of Farah, the fact that she [Mawal] omnisciently narrates her experiences shows how close they are through the stories she tells, and how intimate and empathic their relationship is.

In the case of Um Radwan, even though Mawal does not narrate the stories she tells her through a third person omniscient point of view, one sees that she still understands what Um Radwan goes through: “Somewhere in her has to be grief as large as anyone’s, and one day it is likely to come out” (73). Although Um Radwan herself narrates her stories, Mawal shows that she is aware of the feelings and emotions that are present deep down in the former’s heart, no matter how hard she tries to hide them.

Thus, in *West of the Jordan*, instead of facing the other women’s stories as a representation of her own supposedly sad fate, Mawal is the character who, along with her mother, literally opens the doors to allow them to speak. If it is true that a “life is lived when it is narrated”<sup>9</sup> (Frochtengarten 374, my translation), so rather than incarnating the label of passivity that would most probably be assigned to her, at a first view, Mawal is the one who allows the other female characters to live – in spite of all the restrictions they have to face – standing as a shelter for them, in the midst of an environment that at times can be truly hostile for women.

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<sup>9</sup> “Uma vida é vivida quando narrada” (Frochtengarten 374).

#### 4. Starting Something New: Hala as a Mediator of Two Cultures

In *West of the Jordan*, all of the four narrator-characters are equally important to the understanding of gender and diaspora issues in novel, and all of them shed light on some relevant aspects of the diasporic experience. However, the character Hala is especially intriguing, because she seems to be the only cousin who is able to achieve a certain balance between the two sides of the hyphen: Hala is able to identify herself both as an Arab and an American. It is extremely important to emphasize that Hala does not achieve a perfect balance between these two sides, since this is impossible for a diasporic subject whose condition is unavoidably related to displacement and anguish. Regarding the conflicts which are part of the process of hybridism, Stuart Hall states: “It is about a process of cultural translation, agonistic, since it is never completed, but which remains in its indecisiveness” (Hall, “Da Diáspora” 71).<sup>10 11</sup> Therefore, when I mention the certain balance that Hala achieves, I do not refer to an absence of conflicts, but rather to the ability she has to deal with her sense of displacement so as not to let it hinder her experiences neither in her homeland nor in the host country.

Regarding this issue, Hall disserts about a term which is frequently used in Diaspora Studies, which is hybridism: “another term for the cultural logic of *translation*. This logic becomes more and more evident in the multicultural diasporas” (Hall, “Da Diáspora” 71).<sup>12</sup> In *West of the Jordan*, Hala experiences an advanced hybridization,

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<sup>10</sup> I am aware that his work was originally published in English, but unfortunately I could not have access to it. For the sake of consistency in this dissertation, I have translated the quotation from Portuguese into English myself.

<sup>11</sup> “Trata-se de um processo de tradução cultural, agonístico uma vez que nunca se completa, mas que permanece em sua indecidibilidade” (71).

<sup>12</sup> “um outro termo para a lógica cultural da *tradução*. Essa lógica se torna cada vez mais evidente nas diásporas multiculturais” (71).

since she really embraces strong aspects of both the American and the Arab culture. Hall admits the existence of this “advanced hybridization” and highlights the fact that it seldom has a character of assimilation (“Conclusion: The Multi-Cultural” 227), which can be understood as “one kind of ethnic change in which people become similar, and contrasted with differentiation in which groups stress their distinctiveness” (44). Therefore, as it happens to Hala, in the novel, experiencing an advanced hybridization does not mean that one is privileging one culture over another, but rather, it means that one is making negotiations between the two cultures.

Hall continues disserting about hybridization by giving some examples of subjects who can be considered hybrid ones. According to him,

In diasporic conditions people are often obliged to adopt shifting, multiple or hyphenated positions of identification . . . Even where the more traditionally oriented sections are concerned, the principle of *heterogeneity* continues to be strongly operative . . . In our terms, then, . . . the black teenager who is a dance-hall DJ, plays jungle music but supports Manchester United or the Muslim student who wears baggy, hip-hop, street-style jeans but is never absent from Friday prayers, are all, in their different ways, ‘hybridized’. (“Conclusion: The Multi-Cultural” 227)

Hala, in *West of the Jordan*, could be another example of hybridized subjects given by Hall, since she, as well, manages to live with distinct aspects of the Arab and American culture. Heterogeneity is a key word to the understanding of Hala’s building of her identity, since she is able to aggregate several different elements into her lifestyle and identity.

In order to understand how Hala is able to do deal with her sense of displacement, it is important, first of all, to trace her origins. Hala was born in Jordan, to a Jordanian father and a Palestinian mother. The girl is aware that, despite Jordan and Palestine being close to each other, they are two totally different places, and she shows this awareness when talking about her mother having to adapt to a new world when she got married. Hala states: “In distance, she was not so far from the home in which she grew up, but in reality, she was in another country – another household – with an entirely different way of thinking”. Therefore, Hala has already these two distinct Arab backgrounds she inherited from her parents, and, besides, she has also experienced contact with the American culture.

This contact came when Hala was seventeen years old and her uncle Hamdi, who is her mother’s brother, invited her to live with him and his American wife, Fay, in Arizona in order to finish high school there. At first, Hala’s father strongly opposed this idea, but Huda, the girl’s mother, convinced him to let her go by arguing that if she stayed there she would end up having a sad destiny. She argued: “If Hala stays here she will rot like me and Latifa [Hala’s oldest sister]. Look at us. We have rotted. Let Hala go and dream” (9). Therefore, Huda is aware of the limitations imposed on the Arab women who stay in Jordan and she wants Hala to have a different life.

Besides trying to give Hala better conditions, Huda wants to accomplish her unfulfilled plans of freedom through her daughter, because in the past she too had a chance to go to the United States and to lead a different life, but she returned to Palestine in disgrace, victimized by lies. Hala gives an account of her mother’s reactions to her moving to America:

My mother was excited, perhaps because she thought I’d have a chance to finish what she barely started, or perhaps because she thought I’d have

a freer education. Regardless, I was terrified at the thought of being away from my family, even though the idea of going to America – the America my mother had only tasted – *was* exciting. (9)

Thus, despite the fear Hala experiences, she is willing to go to the United States and Huda's story is part of this excitement, since the opportunity to fulfill her mother's unaccomplished dreams and plans is another source of motivation for the girl. Although submission implies limitations for women, it can also trigger bold and even transgressive actions. In other words, the fact that Huda once had her dreams destroyed by lies that were grounded on the idea that women need to be passive and submissive is exactly what impels Hala to go to the United States. Therefore, wishing to rewrite her mother's story, it is exactly from a situation of submission that her strength and desire to transgress are derived.

However, fulfilling her mother's plans is not the only reason why Hala decides to go to the United States. Readers begin to know what Hala's life was like at the time she lived in Jordan when she is already living in the United States and goes back to her homeland because of her grandmother's death. Returning to this place triggers several recollections about the past and many of them are related to a feeling of constraint and limitation. For instance, Hala mentions that she was always made fun because of her personality and habits. She states: "I was so tired of being made fun of for reading, for being too headstrong, for speaking my mind" (9). Therefore, Hala's strong character was not appropriate to a patriarchal environment, and even the habit of reading was a cause of conflicts at that time.

Hala gives an accurate account of her family's reactions to her reading, showing that, for them, this was not a naïve habit, since it could even affect her possibilities of getting married:

I spent a lot of time alone reading, a source of embarrassment and concern for almost everyone in my family. ‘She will be blind before she is fifteen years old,’ Aunt Suha, my father’s sister, would tell me every time she came over and found me bent over a book. ‘You shouldn’t let her do this or no one will marry her’ . . . My father didn’t approve of reading outside of school texts, and he used to take away my books when he came across them. (8)

Hala was criticized for liking to read because this habit could open several possibilities for her life and could make her have access to new ideas and points of view. In a culture which women’s independence and activeness is seldom stimulated, reading could, especially for a young girl such as Hala, contribute to her escaping from the control of her father and the Arab society, in general.

Even though Hala’s mother and brother would encourage her to read and the latter would even give her some books, Hala found it very hard to endure life under constant criticism, and the censorship to this habit was only a small part of a larger scenario of limitations she had to experience. Although Halaby does not dedicate much space in the novel to Hala’s life in Jordan before going to the United States, her lifestyle can be apprehended by some happenings that take place after her move, which give a clear account of what she has previously lived. For instance, when Hala is already in the United States and goes back to Jordan for the first time, because of her mother’s death, she has to face her father’s authority and his position regarding her role as an Arab girl, and this makes readers imagine what Hala had to go through when she was still living there.

At this moment, Hala’s father tells her not to return to America, since it is time for her to definitely establish herself in her hometown. He tells her: “Hala, it is time for

you to be with your family. I'm sure you understand. You must think about your life now, and plan to put your roots here as a woman'" (45). The fact that Hala's father wants her to put down her roots *as a woman* implies that it is high time she started worrying about the gender specificities related to Arab women, such as getting married, having children and strongly dedicating themselves to their family. Since Hala's mother is now dead, her father wants her to occupy her place by performing what is expected from Arab mothers. However, Hala shows her discontentment with these expected gender roles and fearlessly confronts her father:

A screen lifted from my eyes. I was to replace my mother with a husband. I was to stay in Jordan forever. Marry – engaged even before high school was over. Have children. Be someone else's burden. Maybe I spoke because I learned how to move my tongue like an American. Maybe it was just my grief that made me lose control. Or anger . . . If I stay here, I will kill myself. I will go to my mother and then you will have the blood of two people on your hands. (45)

Therefore, Hala is aware of the kind of life that was waiting for her if she stayed in Jordan, because she knows that the situation she describes is the one lived by many women, including her mother and her older sister, Latifa. The girl even accuses her father of having killed her mother, probably because of the restrictions and limitations he imposed on her, and also because of what this marriage meant to Huda: the end of her plans and dreams.

By saying that she "moved her tongue like an American", Hala implies that having contact with this other culture made her become bolder and more transgressive than she used to be, and it also shows that, at this moment in the novel, she associates freedom and self-affirmation with America – something that will not necessarily remain

like this throughout the novel, as it will be explored further in this dissertation. Before Hala's reactions, her father does not say a word and she goes back to the United States with the feeling of having lost both of her parents in a week (46).

Three years after this argument, Hala returns to Jordan in order to watch her dying grandmother, and her father is the one who picks her up at the airport. Hala's first impressions and feelings are all related to sad and grieving memories about her complicated relationship with her father, and also about the loss of her mother. Regarding this, Hala reflects:

I can't erase the picture of my last visit, my mother's funeral, and then the huge fight. The memory comes in my eyes, burning like the sun that's setting, but I keep my silence as we drive into the desert . . . I am silent. I do not want his [her father's] stories or drunken, smoky love songs tossed in my lap. I want my mother back so much it aches. I want to hear her stories about her village, her words in my ears, her fingers stroking my hair. (13)

Being back in Jordan makes Hala remember her mother more than ever, since the places and situations remind her of Huda. Moreover, Hala is impatient with her father and the only memories related to him are the fight and the annoying stories he usually tells her. This resistance Hala feels towards her father is probably related to her mother's death, because even though she died of cancer, and, thus, he was not directly involved in it, the way he treated her throughout her life and the limitations he imposed on her represent, for Hala, a different kind of killing, one for which he is certainly guilty.

During her first days back to Jordan, Hala mentions that she feels some relief to be there again (77), and she explains this relief by saying: "There *is* comfort to be in my own house, to wake up in my own language" (77). However, the overall tone of her



impressions is mostly related to affliction and grief, at this first moment. The discomfort that characterizes Hala's first days in Jordan is mainly related to a feeling of displacement, since the girl knows that her behaviors and even her way of dressing are not in accordance to what her family and community expected from her. She argues:

I feel a mixture of relief and fatigue to be back . . . I know they see me with curious eyes. I left before marrying age. I have finished high school and I should be coming back for marriage, not for death. I should have longer hair, I should wear makeup. I should not wear blue jeans and 'extremely unfeminine dresses,' as Aunt Suha says. I should stop using English words . . . I am unconnected. (77)

This feeling of being unconnected shows that Hala has walked away from her roots to such an extent that people look at her as if she were a stranger and she herself feels as a foreigner in her own homeland. This feeling derives from the fact that even though she knows how she is supposed to behave, the three years living in contact with another culture made her a different person who is now unable to pretend to be someone she is not.

In fact, this feeling of not belonging when they return to their homelands is something common among diasporic subjects, as Stuart Hall argues. Based on the interviews made by Mary Chamberlain in the book *Narratives of Exile and Return*, in which she writes about the life of Barbadian migrants, Hall talks about the difficulty "many returnees find reconnecting with the societies of their birth" ("Thinking the Diaspora" 3). According to him, these returnees have different reasons not to feel comfortable in their homelands:

Many miss the cosmopolitan rhythms of life to which they have become acclimatized. Many feel that 'home' has changed beyond all recognition.

In turn, they are seen as having had the natural and spontaneous chains of connection disturbed by their diasporic experiences. They are happy to be home. But history has somehow irrevocably intervened. (“Thinking the Diaspora” 3)

Therefore, Hall states that the consequences of diasporic experiences to the connections between the subjects and their homelands are permanent, since once a person leaves home, nothing will ever be the same. In Hala’s situation, besides the reasons presented by Stuart Hall, not only has ‘home’ changed, but she herself has changed a lot, which only increases the level of disturbance brought on by her diasporic experience.

Such great changes obviously do not affect only the girl, but also the people from her family and community who are not used either to the new Hala or to women behaving so differently from what the Arab tradition prescribes. Therefore, Hala notices that these people, who were once familiar to her, are not able to recognize the different person she has become. About this estrangement, Hala states: “. . . all those faces I’ve carried with me for so long wear suspicion in their eyes as they greet me. I have walked so far away from them” (77). Thus, Hala is aware of the fact that she was the one to distance herself from the other people and the suspicion she sees in their eyes is something expected, because they are afraid they do not know her anymore since she has been away from Jordan for such a long time. Regarding the usual reaction that people from homelands have towards hybridized subjects, Hall states that

Were they to return to their villages of origin, the most traditional would be regarded as ‘westernized’, if not as hopelessly diaspora-ized. They are all negotiating culturally somewhere along the spectrum of *différance*, in which disruptions of time, generation, spatialization and dissemination refuse to be neatly aligned. (“Conclusion: The Multi-Cultural” 227)

Thus, moving away to a different place and incorporating some elements of the new culture inevitably creates a distance between the hybrid subjects and the community of their hometowns, since even the slightest changes are usually associated to the diasporic condition. Therefore, even though diasporic subjects try to make negotiations and try to fit again in their communities of origin, suspicious eyes will always accompany them.

In the chapter entitled “White”, Hala continues talking about the lack of connection that characterizes her first days in Jordan. Even when it comes to her relationship with very close relatives, Hala cannot feel they know each other and that they are part of the same family. For instance, when describing her relationship with her sister, Latifa, Hala says: “It’s as if I am watching two people talking as they face a white wall, but I have no connection to them” (78-79). Therefore, when she talks to Latifa, she is not involved in the conversation and what she says is always automatically spoken, as if she were talking to an acquaintance about shallow and hollow subjects, and not to her sister.

This lack of recognition and comfort felt by Hala seems to be reflected even on the physical space of her house, which is seen as an extension of what she experiences. According to Hala, “Everything is white. The house is white, the yard is white tile, and the six-foot wall that borders the house is white. White, white, white, white to blind the morning sun, as though they were in competition” (78). The color white, which is even the title of this chapter, represents the absence of life, emotions, and recognition between Hala and everything else that exists in Jordan. The sun, with its bright and strong color, can be interpreted as the warm bonds that once existed between the girl and her surroundings, while the color white that covers everything represents lifelessness and disconnection. Following this representation, the fact that Hala thinks the bright color of the sun is in competition with the color white shows that there seems

to be a struggle between her desires of belonging again and reconnecting, and this stronger force which keeps pulling her away from a reencounter with her past.

A few pages ahead of this comparison, the color white is again mentioned by Hala. She states: “The morning passes and I am still in a dream, though it now is as stark as the white wall that blinds me” (79). By saying that her dream is as stark as the white wall, Hala makes it clear that desolation and harshness are present in her first days in Jordan, most probably derived from her not being able to connect herself to people and places that were once familiar to her. Besides, Hala, at this moment, does not consider the United States her home, as it can be seen when she says “There *is* comfort to be in my own house, to wake up in my own language” (77). If she says that her house is in Jordan, and that Arabic is her language, it means that the United States and the English language are not familiar to her yet. Therefore, Hala’s sense of desolation comes from the fact that at this point in the novel she is not able to fully identify herself either with the Arab culture or with the American one.

However, as the days go by, Hala starts to see this disconnection with different eyes, and in the chapter entitled “Marriages” she even states that it is now making her happy: “I remain unconnected, like a charm without a chain to hang from, I am happy” (83). In fact, Hala’s feelings in relation to her disconnectedness might be more of relief than happiness. As the title of the chapter indicates, when it comes to marriage, for instance, Hala is satisfied with the fact that she can refuse it since she walked so far away from her roots that now it is easier for her to defy traditions that she does not agree with. Regarding the wedding that is most certainly waiting for her if she stays in Jordan, and her wishes of not succumbing to this possibility, Hala states:

I am not ready to marry at all. I know this. And if I stay here, I might come to feel differently. And then I will be like my mother. The Woman

of Unfulfilled Dreams. Better to be like Uncle Hamdi, The Voice of Reason and Capitalism. If I stay I will be one of my father's jokes too. A joke that makes nobody laugh. (83)

Therefore, at this moment, Hala would rather go to the United States and be immersed in capitalist ideals than stay in Jordan and be a frustrated woman, and one limited by her father's authority and impositions, just like her mother used to be. Thus, although Hala's disconnectedness brings her pain, since she even states that her first days in Jordan were "a blur of memories and nightmares" (77), it also brings her the possibility of transgressing the rules and traditions with which she does not agree, since the distancing between her and the Arab culture and community allow her to more comfortably deny several restrictions imposed upon her.

Despite the fact that in her first days in Jordan Hala feels extremely uncomfortable and seems to be a stranger among all those people who were once familiar to her, there is, in the novel, a significant changing episode. This episode, which happens when she meets her cousin Sharif, contributes a lot for her to be much closer to the Arab culture, and, thus, to start finding a more balanced path between the two sides of the hyphen. Sharif was a very important figure in Hala's childhood, but then they were not in touch anymore, since he moved to Europe and stayed there for several years. The fact that Sharif was important for Hala in her childhood – the moment when she was more attached to her roots – is already, and by itself, very meaningful, because it suggests that his return might bring back for Hala a strong attachment to her roots. At the first moment they meet again, Hala immediately thinks that something is about to change: "I feel a wave inside of me, as though a giant change is about to occur" (119). This "giant change" refers to the fact that Hala would fall in love with Sharif, but it also works as a foreshadowing of her re-approximation to the

Arab culture.

One of the ways through which Sharif connects Hala with her culture is by taking her to visit some important spots of her homeland again. Right from the start, when Sharif is talking to her and inviting her and her sister, Latifa, to wander around with him, the tone of Hala's speech changes, becoming more connected to comfort and peace. About Sharif and the feelings he arouses in her, Hala states: "I don't remember him being this charming and I am amazed at how familiar and comfortable I feel talking to him" (120). The words 'familiar' and 'comfortable', which were absent from Hala's vocabulary thus far begin to be more present, and even though they are, at this moment, used in relation to Sharif, they are soon extended to Jordan and to the Arab community and culture.

Sharif seems to be aware of the important role he is about to play in Hala's life and his awareness can be especially noticed when he tells her: "I am a professional tour guide. I would be delighted to reacquaint you with your homeland. One of your homelands, at least" (120). The fact that Sharif knows that Hala needs to be reacquainted with her homeland, and the emphasis he puts on her having more than one homeland show how aware he is of her condition. Sharif seems to understand that, after some time away from Jordan, Hala does not feel the same connection to that place and he does not look at her as if she were a completely different person – as many people do. Probably Sharif behaves like that because he lived in another place for several years, and thus, he is able to put himself in the position of Hala. Besides, by mentioning that Hala has more than one homeland, Sharif shows his understanding towards the girl's feeling of displacement, and he may be referring either to Nawara – her mother's homeland – or to the United States.

Therefore, by showing Hala that he understands her situation, he makes the girl

feel more comfortable and she starts trusting him and looking at everything in Jordan with different eyes. Right from the start, Hala feels the changes happening: “With this day, a new chapter in my life begins, a new beginning after my grandmother’s death . . . This is the perfect way to come home and taste it all over again” (134). Sharif is able to make Hala “taste it all over again”, by making her relive her own memories, which brings her much closer to her roots. Hala, then, starts to recognize the beauty of her homeland landscapes and the richness of her culture, something that she could not do when she arrived in Jordan, because of all the distancing she was feeling. Hala describes the moments she spends with Sharif and Latifa with joy and excitement: “It is like sitting with the oldest friends in the world, no words are necessary, but when they come, they are most welcome. For the first time since I have been back, I feel at peace” (133). Therefore, here, Hala starts to make peace with her past and she starts to find a certain balance between the American and the Arab aspects of her life, since she is able to find comfort in the Arab environment without having to reject or to be uncomfortable with what she has inherited from living in the midst of the American culture.

An important memory that Sharif brings back to Hala, and one which says much even about her present situation, regards a time when Hala was five or six years old and she and her family – including Sharif, who was about twenty years old at the time – went to a beach in Aqaba, a city in the south of Jordan. While everyone else is talking, Sharif takes Hala to the sea and asks her if she wants to go home, something which brings an enormous confusion for her:

‘Let’s swim home,’ he says with his face still in the sun. ‘Home? This beach won’t reach to Amman. How can we swim there if there is no water?’ I try to stay still so my shell will come back. ‘I mean to Palestine.’ He turns to look at me. ‘We can’t swim to Palestine.’ ‘Why

not? She's right there.' He points to the right, below the sun. We are so close that we can see the houses on the shore. 'That's Palestine?' He nods, still looking, I feel funny inside. 'We're not allowed to go there. It's not our home anymore.' The water is very blurry now. 'Says who?' He stares at me with his hands in fists at his waist. (125)

Through this passage, it becomes extremely clear that, for Hala, being divided between two homes is not something new whatsoever. In fact, this split condition is inherent to her, because of her parents' distinct backgrounds, as it was already mentioned previously on this dissertation. This episode is probably the first time in Hala's life in which she becomes aware of her split identity, and maybe this is why she has never forgotten it, and this memory comes at a very appropriate time, when she feels that her identity is more split than ever and maybe more than she has ever though it would be. It is interesting to notice how surprised little Hala gets at the fact that Palestine is very close to where she is, but, still, she cannot go there because of political reasons and because that is not her home anymore.

Finally, Sharif is not able to take Hala to Palestine because the people who had stayed on the beach start screaming and trying to make them go back. When they get to the shore, Hala's mother gets really angry at them, and especially at Sharif, but Hala defends them by telling her mother that they tried to go to Palestine for a valid and legitimate reason. "We tried to go home!" (129), Hala screams. Thus, at this moment, Hala is angry at the impossibility of going home, and her mother ends up understanding her, and starts treating her very gently again. Hala goes to sleep with this lovely memory of her mother in her mind, and she states: "That is the sweet picture in my mind as I drift off to sleep, surrounded by my mother's presence" (129). Therefore, her mother's presence and the beautiful portions of the memories related to her childhood



and family in Jordan overcome Hala's confusions and discomfort linked to her always present split identity, and this is another strategy she uses in order to diminish the conflicts that might derive from her diasporic condition.

Besides bringing Hala closer to the Arab world by reawakening her memories, telling her stories, and (re)introducing her to this world, Sharif also indirectly contributes to this approximation, maybe without even being aware of it. This happens when Hala admits to herself that she is in love with her cousin, and decides that she should stop thinking about him. She decides that she had better travel to a different place, where she would not see him, and maybe not think about him, and so she goes to Irbid to visit Abu Salwan, her mother's cousin. At Abu Salwan's house, she is, once again, immersed in the Arab culture and its morals, behaviors, stories and landscapes. This immersion comes, especially, through the several stories Abu Salwan's tells her: stories about her mother, the past of that place and that community.

Besides, in Irbid, Hala gets to know many places she did not know before, and, thus, she becomes closer to the Arab world. The changes Hala undergoes in Irbid are so noticeable that she declares: "A week and a half in Irbid and I feel I have slept a month and awoken with clear eyes. I am very happy today. I love to drive in the car and put my hand out the window to catch the breezes" (193). These clear eyes make Hala see that she has the possibility of making negotiations between the American and the Arab culture, and she starts to see that she can live in the United States and absorb some aspects of that culture, as she wishes, but this does not mean that she needs to be uncomfortable with her Arab roots and traits, or even reject or ignore them.

One of the results of this new awakening, this re-approximation or (re)acquaintance with the Arab culture is the fact that Abu Jalal, Hala's father, is flexible enough to let her go back to the United States and to recognize that she is a

good girl and that he is proud of her. Obviously, he is scared with all the differences he has found in Hala, and he even says that she is a stranger to him (195), but he is able to see that Jordan is not the appropriate place for her, because it is not the place she wants to be. While talking to a friend of his, Abu Jalal exposes his feelings about this daughter and talks about her future:

Two months she has been here and I really have no idea what to do with her, so I am going to put her on a plane back to the States. Hala is a kind girl and, you are right, very different from the others. She has her mother's spirit. I was prepared to marry her to someone – a relative – a very good man who would have been a good match for her, but imagine this: he refused me . . . He refused me because he thinks she needs to choose her own life. (195)

The man Abu Jalal had chosen to be Hala's husband is Sharif, and his refusal to marry Hala shows that Arab men, many times, are seen with prejudicial eyes, and they are almost always portrayed as authoritative and cruel men who just want to take advantage of women.

The fact that Sharif refused to marry Hala helps to deconstruct this prejudice, since he only did that because he thought that Hala would not be happy if she stayed in Jordan, so he decided to prioritize her happiness. Sharif knew that Hala getting married at such a young age would mean that she would have a life totally different from everything she was trying to build in the United States. Even though Hala was in love with Sharif and he could feel that, he thought that she would be happier if she had the opportunity to travel to other places, like he had once done, before getting married. Although Hala liked Sharif, he believed that such a young woman getting married to an older man would prevent her from knowing other people and places, which would

hinder her chances of being actually free. The Arab society, in fact, is very sexist and women are usually submissive, but this does not mean that all Arab men are the same way, and Sharif is a good example of the fact that these men can be understanding and can put women's well-being as a priority over traditions and customs.

In fact, a masculine figure is the one who mostly helps Hala in the process of finding a certain balance in her life. More than any other character in the novel, Sharif is the one who leads Hala through a path of self-discovery and renewal of her identity, and he is even the one who breaks the supposed rules of patriarchy in the novel. The novel, thus, raises an extremely important point by disrupting a pre-conceived idea that most people nurture towards Arab men. As Zeina Zaatari argues, Arab men are still often portrayed as “violent, fanatic, fundamentalist who enjoy reading Qur’anic verses just before they start shooting women and children” (83). Although this may seem exaggerated, the stereotypes of Arab men are, in fact, usually based on fanaticism and violence, as Zaatari states.

Darraj also argues that “the image of the oppressed, silenced Arab women is frequently used by some as proof of the barbarity of Arab culture, and even to justify the West’s foreign policy toward the East” (159). This image of the oppressed Arab women is obviously related to the image of the aggressive Arab men, and it is important to look critically at these stereotypes, since, as Darraj states, they are used in the service of Western perspectives. Thus, before one decides to believe in these images about Arab men, one needs to take into consideration that such images are not naïve and serve some interests. Besides, even though the Arab culture is patriarchal and women, in fact, suffer from many privations, it needs to be admitted that not all Arab men are evil and violent, and this can be clearly seen in *West of the Jordan*.

Going back to the novel, some moments after talking about Hala's not having to get married, Abu Jalal mentions his decision to let her go back to the United States, and here, his affection and comprehension towards the girl become even clearer. He states:

I am proud of you. It seems you are a very good girl . . . You have changed since you've been gone. I can think of no one here who would be a good match for you now. Maybe in several years, or maybe not. Maybe you are better suited to marry someone who isn't Arab. I don't know. I think you should finish – or at least start – the university before you get married. (196-97)

Therefore, Abu Jalal is even open for the possibility of Hala marrying someone who is not Arab, which shows, once again, that many Arab men can be tolerant and flexible, and even though Abu Jalal has not always been this way, he is now a different person. Abu Jalal is able to see that Hala is a good girl, in spite of her Western clothes and the different habits she has acquired, showing that diasporic Arab women who want to explore the several dimensions of their split identity may have their family's support and approval. Moreover, if Hala were completely detached from her roots, her father would have manifested disapproval in some way and most likely would not trust in her like he did.

When Hala knows her father's final decision, she becomes extremely happy and she is aware that she is a privileged girl. Regarding this privilege, Hala states: "I feel I have been granted the greatest freedom" (197), but there is something which prevents her from being completely satisfied. The problem is that Sharif has refused to marry her and even though, throughout the novel, Hala often shows her opposition to marriage, she is in love with Sharif and feels somehow rejected because of his decision, and

especially when she discovers that he is engaged to another woman. Sharif seems to notice the way Hala feels and talks to her about her going back to the United States: ““I think you have come back here to say good-bye. Do you see yourself being happy here?”“I cannot see beyond today well enough to answer this question. I cannot see beyond the confused longing I have felt since the first day he came to visit”” (199).

Thus, even though the time Hala spent in Jordan was characterized by her reconciliation with her past, her family and the Arab culture, she does not change her mind and decides to go back to the United States. She makes such a decision because she knows that the life she has in America and the perspectives that wait for her in that country are already part of her, and thus, she cannot simply reject everything as if they have never existed. However, her trip back to the United States explicitly shows that she will not leave her Arabness behind and that it will coexist with the American world. One of the strong evidences which show that Hala now cares and values her roots are the clothes she chooses to wear during the trip. Hala symbolically wears her mother’s *roza* (an embroidered dress typical from Nawara), made by her grandmother, and not Western clothes, such as shirts and jeans, that she used to wear.

This choice made by Hala arouses surprise and astonishment in the people of her family. Her father who was once disappointed with her because she did not wear traditional Arab clothes is now confused about his daughter wearing the *roza*. He tells her: ““Why must you wear that? You know it is not appropriate. You are not going to a village or for a visit to someone. You are flying to America! Miss Modern Lady Who Had Almost no Interest In Dresses Until Today, why can’t you wear your beloved jeans like you do all the time?”” (203). Here, it is possible to see that her father does not like the fact that she does not dress appropriately: she was wearing jeans when she arrived in Jordan, and now she will wear a *roza* to arrive in the United States. However, he does

not understand that Hala does not want to go against the patterns all the time; she is just trying to adapt herself to the different situations and trying to find her way.

In fact, the reasons Hala gives for wearing that *roza* are all related to the closer contact she wants to have with her roots and with the memories of her mother. She explains:

I am wearing a *roza* that my grandmother made for my mother as part of her trousseau. My mother wore mostly western clothes – skirts and shirts or western dresses – but at home she did like *dish-dashes* and this *roza*. I remember her wearing it and being happy. It is not a fancy one, but the pattern is clever and it suits me. I even imagine it still carries her scent. (I don't tell anyone that it is so hot that underneath it I am wearing only underwear – not a T-shirt and *shalwar* pants as my mother would wear.)

(203-04)

By wearing this typical Arab dress which once belonged to her mother in a happy occasion, Hala implies that she, as well, can be happy staying connected to her roots. Furthermore, the fact that she does not wear anything under the *roza*, because of the hot weather, results in a closer contact with this typical dress. Hala wearing the *roza* so close to her skin, then, can be interpreted as a sealing of her approximation to the Arab culture and her roots, since despite doing that for a practical reason, it comes exactly when she starts to feel the Arab culture in her skin. Moreover, it can also be implied that Hala is able to find ways to embrace her roots without abnegating the possibilities of transgression, since *rozas* are usually worn with other clothes under them. Even though, as it was already emphasized, she does this for practical motivations, she knows that the hot weather is not a reason for exempting Arab women from wearing clothes under the *roza*, since she is careful enough not to tell anyone about it.

Thus, Hala takes a symbol of Palestinian tradition and grants it a new use and significance. Regarding these new appropriations of tradition, Hall states that through culture we are able to “produce ourselves anew, as new kinds of subjects” (“Thinking the Diaspora” 16). Hall continues by arguing that

It is therefore not a question of what our traditions make of us so much as what we make of our traditions. Paradoxically, our cultural identities, in any finished form, lie ahead of us. We are always in the process of cultural formation. Culture is not a matter of ontology, of being, but of becoming. (“Thinking the Diaspora” 16)

Therefore, diasporic experiences enable subjects to experience this process of cultural formation more acutely than any other individuals, since they usually need to get their traditions and adapt them into something else, according to their necessity. By transforming the Arab traditions, Hala is also transforming herself into a new person in a never ending process of identitary construction.

Besides the *roza*, Hala also takes a gold charm from Palestine – a gift from Sharif – to America. Thus, if Hala once thought that in Jordan she was like a “gold charm without a chain to hang from” (83), now she takes, with her, a Palestinian charm that shows she is now connected to her roots. When going back to the United States, Hala’s impressions and feelings are very different from the fear and discomfort she felt when going to Jordan. Now, Hala is placid and feels peace within her and with her present situation. Regarding this, she states:

I am not at all nervous on this flight. There is no mystery and no worrying. No one is expecting a face I cannot offer. No, this flight is quiet. Two seats and no one to join me, to glare at me as I ache for Sharif. People do walk by and look at me strangely. Too young a girl

with too short a hair for that *roza* (a *thobe*, in their minds). I wonder if they think I am a foreigner. (204)

At the beginning of the novel, Hala was seen as foreigner in Jordan, but now, they might think she is a foreigner in America. This happens because after the trip, Hala is more connected with her Arab roots, which is reflected on the way she is dressed, and, perhaps, also in the way she behaves herself. Hala is now so related to her roots that this may be noticeable even in ways that go beyond her appearance.

The feeling Hala has, at this moment, is related to renewal and new beginnings. Hala is finally able to accept that she can live in America and enjoy the portions of the American culture that appeal to her, but she can still carry her past and culture with her. Regarding this, she states:

I am starting over, starting over. My mother is always with me. My father has not abandoned me, and Sharif has introduced me to something wonderful. It is time to start something new, and something old, not to fix something unfinished. I will watch just the right way, to see the underside of things, the thinking things and the forgetting things, as my mother used to say. And then I will start university, and I will not come back in disgrace. (204)

By saying that she does not want to fix anything, Hala makes it clear that the relations she cultivates with the American culture are not something wrong that should be straightened. On the contrary, Hala recognizes that she will keep on going with what she used to be in the past – her connection with America obviously included – but changes will happen. From that moment on, she decides to take her Arab memories and stories into her American life, giving importance to her past and letting it affect her



present, without denying what she has in America. As she states in the last lines of the novel, her world is now new, but certainly not unfamiliar (220).

This is a new joint world between the American and Arab cultures, and Hala appeals to the memories of her homeland in order to begin a process of identity construction which values the Arab culture, without diminishing the American one. When Hala goes back to her house in the United States, an extremely significant passage shows that the character finds a way of not letting her memories disappear: she turns to objects that allude to her past and to the Arab culture and she takes them to her bedroom, where they are displayed, among several symbols of the American culture, as traces of a past which was, and still is, determinant to the construction of her identity. When observing the pictures which were in a box, Hala states:

I dive headfirst into this box of photos and stay inside until they paper the insides of my eyes. Soon it won't matter what our walls are like because every time I look up I will see Ma smiling at me, or Sitti peeling carrots, or Latifa spilling the tea on a prospective husband. Remember for yourself and for your tomorrow . . . Remember the stories of Nawara: everything, including the tragedies. (219)

This box full of pictures can be considered what Pierre Nora calls “sites of memory”. According to Nora, these sites are useful to one’s evocation of the past, since “there is no spontaneous memory” (12) and they are always covered with a “symbolic aura.”

Regarding this aura, Nora affirms: “A purely functional site, like a classroom manual, a testament, or a veterans’ reunion belongs to the category only inasmuch as it is also the object of a ritual” (19). Therefore, Hala’s box of pictures and the walls of her bedroom – after she hangs the pictures on them – become sites of memory, because the character invested these objects with the strong intention of not forgetting her preceding

life. Thus, through these attitudes, Hala seems to notice that, now, her memories, including the unhappy ones, are part of her identity, and they work as a link between what she is now and what used to be some time ago, since her past in Jordan and the Arab culture exert great influence on the constitution of her present subjectivity.

It is interesting to notice that memory, for Hala, assumes the characteristics of modern memory itself. One of these characteristics is related to the material aspect of it. According to Nora, modern memory “relies entirely on the materiality of the trace, the immediacy of the recording, the visibility of the image” (13). Such materiality is present in Hala’s box of pictures at first, and later on the walls full of images. The moment when Hala gets close to these objects is the first time when she comes in deep contact with her memories, which emphasizes the importance of materiality for modern memory.

Nora also mentions the “duty-memory” (16) as another remarkable aspect of modern memory. As he states, nowadays there is a necessity to remember that becomes even an obligation. According to what he argues,

when memory is no longer everywhere, it will not be anywhere unless one takes the responsibility to recapture it through individual means. The less memory is experienced collectively, the more it will require individuals to undertake to become themselves memory-individuals. (16)

This is, in fact, what happens to Hala, since her intense desire to remember comes exactly when she realizes that at her uncle’s house nobody makes an effort to cultivate memories. Even though the Arab community in the United States, in general, has a strong connection to homelands and traditions, Hala’s surroundings are not like that. There is not, in the novel, a single reference to people around Hala, in the U.S., celebrating memories, rituals or traditions, which makes her take the responsibility to

remember, and to become a “memory-individual,” in Nora’s terms.

Besides, when the American culture seems, to her, extremely alien and distant, her memories are what make her feel attached to something bigger and more significant, which constitutes a therapeutic function of memory, one that helps the immigrants endure the privations of transplantation into a foreign culture (Rosińska 39). When the walls of Hala’s American house seem to her extremely white and lifeless, her memories are the ones to make her fill all those annoying empty spaces. Regarding the lifelessness of the American house, Hala states:

The house is decorated in high class American style, no knickknacks, no faded pictures, and no Muhammad mosaics . . . High-class American blah, no soul, no colors . . . Funny how this never bothered me before, how I almost didn’t notice it . . . Everywhere I look is clean, neat, Navajo white. There are no photos and only one painting in the living room. It is a grayish, whitish abstract. I cannot imagine anything when I look at it. I might as well just stare at the wall. (216-17)

Therefore, Hala feels so bothered by the white walls because they do not allow her to think and feel, and they do not present any references related to memories and past events. Uncle Hamdi’s house is, thus, programmed to make people appreciate its “high-class American” decoration, and not to arouse feelings and emotions in its guests and inhabitants, like what happens in Hala’s house in Jordan. According to her, in her Arab house there was “always somewhere to look to take you somewhere else, to make you think. Either a memory resurrected or a new place to go or a joy to feel” (217).

Thus, when comparing the two houses and the feelings aroused by them, Hala feels nostalgic and misses her old house in Jordan. The white walls of the American house are not able to make her feel at home yet, and even though she went to the United

States following her desires, at this moment, she is not able to feel peace and comfort.

Regarding the nostalgia that the lifeless walls make her experience, Hala affirms:

This is now my home . . . I am alone with the white walls that never bothered me before, and longing, so much longing for a home that doesn't exist anymore, and I close my eyes again and go back, just like that, eight thousand miles in the blink of an eye . . . What I want to know is how you expect to make it in this country if you're wandering around with a knot the size of yesterday in your stomach . . . I need clutter and memories. How could I have lived here for three years and not be bothered by this? Maybe because it was never mine before. (217-18)

This reflection made by Hala is extremely important for the understanding of several key points of her relationship with America and Jordan. First of all, Hala misses her home in Jordan, but she knows that this home does not exist anymore, meaning that even though the physical house is still there, every time she goes back to that place, it will be different. In fact, the impossibility of diasporic subjects returning to unchanging homes is due to their diverse experiences, which shape the way they perceive the notion of home. Thus, Hala is extremely aware of her own condition as a diasporic subject, which also helps her to deal with her sense of displacement.

Besides, this awareness is also present when Hala questions her previous ability to live in the United States without being bothered by a longing for a home that does not exist anymore, by a lifeless house which prevents her from cultivating her memories, and by a never-ending sense of nostalgia. Therefore, Hala, at this point of [in] the novel, reaches the climax of a process of self-discovery which started when she left Jordan for the first time in order to live in America. Although Hala now experiences a sense of loss and nostalgia, she is aware of her condition as a diasporic subject, a dimension

previously unconscious to her.

Regarding the feeling of homesickness after one's own longing to leave home, Susan Friedman argues that "homesickness too is a cryptogram; the word opens up into opposites: sick for home and sick of home" ("Bodies on the Move" 191). This double meaning of homesickness, presented by Friedman, can be found in Hala's relations to the United States and to Jordan: she was the one who wanted to leave Jordan, but, at the same time, she feels nostalgic towards it. By citing a fictional character who faces the contradictions of being homesick, Dorothy, from *The Wizard of Oz*, Friedman explains that such ambiguity is necessary for the whole process of one learning to gain homes, and to lose others. According to Friedman, Dorothy "longs for home – but only after she fulfills her wish to leave it" ("Bodies on the Move" 191), which shows that wishing to go back home is as necessary as wishing to leave home, something that also happens to Hala in the novel.

Through self-awareness Hala is able to find ways so as to overcome some of the difficulties imposed on her by her diasporic condition. An effective possibility found by the character is rescuing her memories and using them in order to fill the blank spaces which are extremely bothering for her. This way, she is able to relate the memories of her previous life with the life she has chosen to be hers from that moment on. Thus, little by little, Hala becomes less disturbed, and, if, at the beginning of the novel, Hala used to feel as a "charm without a chain to hang from" (83), it is exactly when she gets in touch with her memories that she starts to be part of something, and this is how memory starts to have a therapeutic function for the character.

Hala, then, spreads the pictures she found in a box all over her bedroom walls, and, after this, she reflects upon the new meaning of her bicultural experience brought by those images:

By the evening the bare walls are bearable, lively, different and familiar. I sit on the floor and stare, then close my eyes. It is deep nighttime in Amman – and in Nawara – and I have tucked my memories under a scratchy blanket, wishing them the sweetest dreams as I open my eyes to a new, but not unfamiliar world. (220)

Therefore, what used to be almost unbearable for Hala becomes extremely tolerable and full of new meanings, since the contact between the character and her memories allows her to be more comfortable and familiarized with something that, before, used to be related only to dislocation and discomfort. It is interesting to notice, moreover, that Hala knows the right time to decentralize these memories and remove them from her main focus, by saying that she has tucked them under a blanket. Hala admits the crucial role that memories play, but she knows that there is a new world which, despite having been discovered with the help of these memories, goes way beyond them.

As it was exposed in this dissertation, Hala is the character in *West of the Jordan* who is most capable of negotiating the Arab culture with the American one. Although, at the beginning of the novel, Hala seems to be tired of the restrictions imposed on her by the Arab culture, her return to Jordan makes her open her eyes to possibilities which she was not able to see before. She begins to see that it is possible for her to live in the United States and enjoy what the American life and culture have to offer her, and still embrace her Arab background. In spite of not achieving a perfect and complete balance, since diasporic subjects are always submitted to conflicts and feelings of loss and displacement, Hala manages to embrace both cultures and to build a new world, mainly through her memories and also through the awareness of her own condition as an Arab-American subject.

## Conclusion

In this dissertation I analyzed the diasporic experiences of four fictional characters: Khadija, Soraya, Hala, and the non-diasporic, but clarifying experience of Mawal. It was my contention that each of the four narrator-characters in Laila Halaby's *West of the Jordan* experiences their diasporic conditions in different ways, which shows that this condition is always heterogeneous. I investigated the ways in which the diasporic subjects in the novel act differently from each other in this process of attempting to build and define who they are. Moreover, I recognized the important role that gender plays in the novel, since it permeates the characters' relations in both their homelands and the host country. Even though diaspora was my main focus, gender was always present in the analyses I developed, since it interferes in the way individuals relate with different cultures.

Throughout my research, I could notice that Halaby, in the novel, approaches issues related to cross-cultural identities and to the fact that hybrid subjects do not behave in a homogeneous manner, differing from each other in relation to the way they position themselves between two virtually distinct cultures. Hybrid subjects receive input and influences from different sources, and, thus, it is very complex for them to deal with all the diverse cultural traits and ways of being that they come across in the process of building their identities.

I could notice that this is complicated further by the fact that each subject comes from different social, economic and family contexts, and, therefore, each of them ends up having different attitudes towards their own hybridism. The complexity of this process is even more aggravated when it comes to female teenagers, as it is the case represented in the novel selected for analysis in this dissertation, since ethnic issues are

crossed by those of age and gender. Although I did not deal directly with theories regarding the influence of age in diasporic processes, throughout my research I always had in mind the fact that Khadija, Soraya, Mawal and Hala are going through the transition from adolescence to adulthood. This consideration was very important for me because it prevented me from elaborating very definite assertions and interpretations about the young women, since at this point in one's life conceptions about every issue are changing more than ever. Every positioning and identity is in constant transformation, but people at the end of adolescence experience these fluctuations more than at any age, which made me constantly consider that the characters' attitudes and behaviors, in the novel, would serve as bases for their oncoming identities, but they are definitely not fixed and established.

Even though I suspected I would find different patterns of behaviors in the narrator-characters, I was surprised at some very important nuances that I discovered. At first, I believed that Khadija had a tendency to assimilate, since she seemed to vehemently reject everything that was related to the Arab culture. However, what I could notice, with the help of Abdelrazek's interpretations, is that she is a completely lost young woman, who is neither comfortable with the American culture or with the Arab one. Her life is guided by displacement, and she is the victim of it even within the domestic realm, through her father's violent and uncontrollable behavior. I discovered that Khadija cannot relate to the Arab culture because she does not *know* it, and the accounts of it given by her parents are not enough to make her feel closer to it.

Even though she tries, at times, to convince herself that the American culture is actually appropriate for her, there are not any strong bonds that make her belong to the American culture. In fact, the most prominent aspect of her relation with it is also related to fear and displacement: she is completely lost and scared by the American



freedom, especially the sexual freedom. If Khadija really had a tendency to assimilate, as I suspected at first, she would not feel like that, or, even if she did, she would try to disguise her reactions, something that does not happen in the novel. Assimilation, for Khadija, would mean that she would act the same way she sees her American friends acting, but she is certainly not willing to do whatever it takes to be accepted by Americans. In fact, she is often more shocked than frustrated at the difference she encounters between the two cultural behaviors.

This is the biggest difference between Khadija and Soraya, who have very similar backgrounds, since both of them are second generation immigrants. While Khadija is shocked and scared, Soraya really wants to belong to the American culture, trying to assimilate indeed. Throughout my research I could notice that Soraya, rather differently from Mawal, tries to act like an American, because she thinks that the fact she lives in the U.S. means she needs to actually *be* an American. Guided by this thought, Soraya tries to assimilate the American culture, especially through her liberated sexual behavior and through her opposition to the Arab traditions and thoughts her family cultivates.

Soraya tries to fit among the Americans to such an extent that she even shares and helps to disseminate stereotyped views which many Americans have of the Arab culture. Thus, an intriguing aspect that I found about Soraya is that she is not concerned with undoing Arab myths that permeate the Americans' imaginary, but rather she wants to satisfy their craving for exoticism, so she can feel accepted and integrated, at a time when there seems to have a general effort of deconstructing stereotypes.

However, I came to the conclusion that Soraya's assimilation is a frustrated one, since she realizes that she will never be considered truly American, and complete assimilation is something impossible to be fully achieved. In order to find comfort and

relief from this predicament of not belonging to a place that she wishes were hers, Soraya turns her eyes back to Palestine, by remembering some Arab-related stories and by wishing she were back in her hometown, at least for a moment. Despite this momentary nostalgia that assaults Soraya, I had to be careful enough to notice that it does not mean that the character finally finds comfort in the Arab world. In fact, the overall tone of Soraya's passages remains that of confusion and in-betweeness.

This is also Khadija's positioning and even though their background is very similar, one of the most interesting conclusions that I could reach is actually related to the comparison between the two of them. On the one hand, Khadija shows absolutely no wish of going back to Palestine, but she never really tries to embrace the American culture either. On the other, Soraya, despite showing a stronger connection to the Arab world (when compared to Khadija), does everything in order to be part of the American world, and sexual liberation, which is viewed, by her, as the opportunity to belong, is exactly what generates in Khadija a bigger sense of displacement and non-belonging.

When analyzing the character Mawal, I could bring a fresh perspective to my study, since I could investigate the point of view of those who are not directly involved in diasporic processes. The most meaningful result of my investigation, regarding Mawal, was the development of the concept of "diaspora space" which includes those who are left behind, proposed by the theoretician Nicholas Van Hear. Through this concept I could include Mawal in my study and the importance of this character to the understanding of diaspora in the novel, which I suspected at first, was confirmed. I could notice that Mawal works as a counterpoint to some aspects present in her diasporic cousins, highlighting the differences that exist between those who leave their homelands and those who remain attached to their roots. For instance, Mawal is the only narrator-character who, throughout the novel, shows empathy for those in Nawara

who lost beloved people to the United States. Mawal's hybrid cousins cannot grasp this nuance of diaspora in the same manner that she can, and my discussion of Mawal in this dissertation sheds light on some issues regarding diaspora that would go unnoticed if were she absent from my comparative analysis.

Moreover, through the analysis of this character I could investigate issues related to Arab feminism. I could see that the fact that Mawal chooses to be loyal to the Arab culture does not mean she chooses submission in detriment of liberation. Mawal's strong connection with her mother shows she is comfortable with her Arabness, and, especially when they join each other in order to listen to other Arab women's transgressive stories and secrets, it is clear that Mawal does not live a completely obedient life, but rather, demonstrates transgression through language.

Besides, at a certain point in my research I wondered whether the fact that Mawal is a Palestinian and lives in Nawara makes her a displaced person, as Abdelrazek argues, since Palestinian people are always already displaced, because of their history of conflicts. However, by carefully analyzing the novel, I came to the conclusion that Mawal feels perfectly comfortable and, compared with her cousins, she is the least displaced character in the novel, maybe because she is still too young to feel this Palestinian displacement proposed by Abdelrazek.

Finally, when analyzing the character Hala I was able to notice that even though she is able to deal with her sense of displacement, something that Khadija and Soraya cannot do, she goes through a difficult journey. In order to apprehend how she negotiates with both the Arab and the American cultures, I tried to investigate all the moments of this journey, and I could conclude that she is only able to achieve some balance after she experiences different levels of proximity with both cultures. Getting closer and actually *knowing* these cultures – different from what happens to Khadija and

Soraya – is what enables Hala to embrace both of them. Besides, I discovered that knowing when to let certain aspects of each culture go also helps Hala to deal with her sense of displacement.

During my research, I noticed that other important aspects regarding Hala are related to memory and gender. At first, I did not intend to go more deeply into memory issues, but then I noticed that it is essential, because memory, throughout the whole novel, is what allows Hala to build connections between her past and her present, between one culture and the other. After analyzing all the characters, I believe that memory is what fundamentally distinguishes Hala from her cousins and it is the defining aspect for a more successful negotiation between two cultures.

Regarding gender, its importance lies on the fact that the healthy relations Hala is able to construct with men throughout the novel are essential to the certain balance she is able to achieve. She is empowered by her relation with Sharif because he familiarizes her with her culture again and, and also because he, instead of trapping her into a marriage, lets her free to have more experiences before getting married. Also, Hala's father's support and trust, which is developed by both of them throughout the novel, is one of the most important reasons for Hala's embracing the Arab side of the hyphen and aggregating it to the American one.

Throughout my research, one interesting aspect that came to light had, at first, gone unnoticed. This aspect is related to the title of the novel. At the beginning, I obviously believed that it carried a relevant meaning, but I did not worry about probing into it deeply. As my research developed, geographical locations – Jordan (Amman, Irbid), Palestine (Nawara), the United States – became so meaningful and important, that I knew the title of the novel, also related to geography, should be investigated, since it would most probably enrich my research.

“Jordan”, in the title *West of the Jordan*, might be associated, in an inattentive reading, to the country, but the article “the” makes it clear that it does not refer to the country, but rather to the Jordan River. Geographically, it separates the country Jordan, in its east bank, and the West Bank and the Gaza Strip – Palestinian territories – which are located in its west portion. In a broader interpretation, then, the title may refer to the places which are at west of the river, and which are very meaningful to the plot: the United States, where Khadija, Soraya, and Hala now live, and Palestine, especially Nawara, where Mawal lives and where the mothers of the four girls are from.

Another interpretation is also possible, since the Jordan River has a strong symbolic value in both folklore and religion, mainly because, in the Bible, crossing it meant achieving the Promise Land (Palestine). The Bible has an explicit reference to it: “Now then, you and all these people, get ready to cross the Jordan River into the land I am about to give to them” (*Holy Bible*, Joshua 1:2). The Israelites were the ones who were supposed to cross the river from east to west in order to reach Palestine, and even though this was a very hard enterprise, it was worth it, according to the Bible.

Since Hala is the only narrator-character who is situated east of the river, in Jordan, Halaby’s title may refer to this character’s movements of going from East to West. On the one hand, the United States, which is west of the river, may represent the “promised land”, since it is a place of new beginnings and possibilities for Hala. On the other hand, the “promised land” may be Palestine, because even though Hala, in the novel, never goes there, it is a place of origins; her mother is from there and she even wanted to go back home when she was in Aqaba with her family. Although Hala was a child at this time and could not fully understand the issue of Palestine also being her home, this episode shows that Palestine is not totally absent from her life. Besides, the significance of Palestine, for Hala, may be related to the fact that Sharif, who is her

mother's cousin, is also from there, and the possibility of getting married to him might also have meant the possibility of going to Palestine.

Thus, I believe that the title of the novel stands for Hala's diasporic movements. When Hala "crosses the Jordan" and goes to its west side, Hala goes through a tough experience, full of conflicts and questionings. The "promised land" may be the place of new beginnings, the United States, which makes her an Arab-American woman, or may be the point of return, of origins, Palestine, which makes her Palestinian-Jordanian. For Hala, as well as for the other diasporic narrator-characters of the novel, the "promised land" may be nowhere or everywhere, may be the point of departure or the point of arrival. However, one thing is certain: all of them have embarked on a complex and never-ending journey and each of them will always have to "cross the Jordan", cross bridges, and cross hyphens in unique and strategic ways.

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