

Arab American Feminism: The Political and the Literary Strategies of Re-writing between Borders in Contemporary Post-9/11 Fiction by Women Writers

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Abstract

Undeniably, Arab American women occupy a debatable position in mainstream culture and politics. Because of their former invisibility, they started to claim their presence and to fight for their rights in post-9/11 America. They ardently become aware of their submission to both Arab patriarchy and sexism and the necessity to fight against this denigrating position. Likewise, they realise that they were silenced in discourses against Arab and Muslim discrimination in the United States. This paper focuses on the ways they have been challenging these discriminatory and invisibilizing discourses against Arab women through shedding light on their Transnational Feminist concerns in their writings, in which they have created a site to communicate anti-discrimination discourses, and to oppose the stereotypical monolithic portrayals of Arab men that are mainly due to the hypervisibility and the demonization of Arabs in post- 9/11 America. Additionally, it highlights how the Shehrazadian narrative strategy in contemporary Arab American women's writing engulfs several features and illustrations of confrontation and resistance to the stereotypical representations of Arab women, mainly in the American popular culture. Indeed, Shehrazade and her narrative strategies become in this context a collective means for re-writing, reviving and redefining grandmother figures from the past. Shehrazade's storytelling, as a life-serving strategy, becomes a metaphor for the urgency of exploring why and how figures like Shehrazade are translated across cultures and how Orientalism shapes such translation.

Keywords: Transnational Arab American Feminism, Re-writing Shehrazade's Narrative, Negotiating Identities, Arabs in post-9/11 America

1. Introduction

Before delving into the current discussions on transnational feminist movements, I would like first to clarify how I am going to employ this term. On the one hand, the feminist movements I try to foreground are sensitive to the inequity of power relations between 'First World' and 'Third World' countries. Likewise, they are attentive to the fact that other issues, such as social status, educational level, religious orientations represent challenges that require to be tackled for local activism plans to thrive and for mobilization of international subject matters to gain strength. LeelaFernandes (2013) explains the concept of transnationalism as:

Inadvertently sets in motion a series of methodological biases through the analytical frames it has brought to feminist scholarship. The concept of the transnational methodologically orients feminist research toward sites that are visibly identifiable as border-crossing spaces in this process, transnationalism in effect becomes a territorially bound definition—it is defined by the border-crossing dimension of the particular phenomenon under analysis. (p. 115)

Transnational feminism has emerged in the early 1990s within the interdisciplinary landscapes of the US academy. It has materialized out of its authors' commitment to articulate meticulous issues such as gender, race, and class in the United States. Manish Desai perceives that "since its articulation in the mid-1990s in the United States, primarily by academics of color, the term transnational feminism has become ubiquitous not just in the US academy but also in academic discourses around the world" (Desai, 2015, p. 116). Consequently, North American academics such as Alexander and Mohanty (2010), Grewal (2001) and Fernades (2013) have investigated the signification and the way the concept has been shaped in feminist writings. A transnational feminist practice confides on establishing feminist solidarities across the different distributions of matters such as class, work, belief, place, identity, and so on. According to Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003), "in these very fragmented tiles it is both very difficult to build these alliances and also never more important to do so. Global capitalism both destroys the possibilities and also offers the new ones" (p. 250). She also points out to the leadership roles women have been occupying in some of the cross-border collaborations against corporate unfairness. "Thus, making gender, and women's bodies and labor visible, and theorizing this visibility as a process of articulating a more inclusive politics are crucial aspects of feminist anti-capitalist critique" (p. 250).

Undeniably, current controversies over postmodernism and the conception of culture have produced many chances for the transnational approach to emerge particularly with regard to the investigations of power relations between dissimilar cultures. Yet, the majority of the current compilations on postmodernism does not highlight the task of the colonial and postcolonial means of representations in constructing and framing the contexts of modernity and post modernity.

2. Arab Feminists' Trends in the 20th and 21st Centuries

In her book *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of Modern Debate* (1992) Leila Ahmad traces Arab feminism to the beginning of the 20th century. She highlights the variety of the Arab world and points to the fact that each Arab country's evolution of feminism is dissimilar. On the other hand, she refers to the example of Egypt which she perceives as "the mirror or persecutor of developments in the Middle East" (p. 175). According to her, the discourses on feminisms were elaborated into two major sub-discourses: the main one was westernized and secularized, whereas the other was an Islamic feminist discourse. Nonetheless, towards the end of 20th c mainly after the 1967 Arab Israeli war, Islamic feminism was empowered. Due to Islamic revitalization of the 1970s in the Arab world, some Arab women also were determined to shed light on Islamic matters, chiefly re-reading the Qur'an.

Additionally, the writings of both prominent feminist Arab writers: Nawal El –Saadawi and Fatima Mernissi should be referred to at this level as they have been fundamental in the progress of studies done on Arab women. El –Saadawi's polemical and literary work on female mutilation: *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World* 1980 and Mernissi's studies done on gender relations in Islam *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society* 1987 have shown them to the public as chief icons in the context of Arab feminist movements.

Consequently, the alliance of women is also perceived to be compulsory in contemporary Arab feminist consideration. Accordingly, the diversity of Arab feminisms needs to be accredited, since their discourses, chiefly revolved around dismantling sexism and patriarchy and have indisputably shaped Arab American feminisms. Indeed this part has roughly traced the history of existing trends within Arab feminisms. Apart from that, it does highlight the idea that Arab American feminisms did not occur from scratch. Aside from being shaped by women of color feminisms in the United States, Arab American feminisms are considered to be typically diasporic transnational developments of Arab feminisms.

3. Arab American Feminisms: Tracing Their Genesis and Developments

In the introduction of their book, *Arab & Arab American Feminisms: Gender, Violence, & Belonging*, Rabab Abdulhadi, Evelyn Alsultany, Nadine Christine Naber (2012) point that:

We imagine a radical feminist politics that insists on the simultaneity of racial justice, gender justice, economic justice, and self-determination for colonized women, men, queer, and transgender people 'over here' and 'over there'. This transnational feminist vision inspires us to imagine a world without oppression and think about alternatives to exclusionary heteromasculinist and xenophobic politics. (p. xxxv)

In other words, Arab American feminisms could be regarded as transnational forms of manifestations aspiring to spread out justice, without particular insistence on gender impartiality and explicit apprehension for Arab Diaspora in the United States. As a matter of fact, Arab American women have endeavoured to establish areas of contestation and confrontation, which firstly occurred in structured and institutionalized forms in the 1980s. They realized the need to speak out their distress against anti-Arab bias and against the manipulations of patriarchy and neopatriarchy at the heart of Arab communities in the United States. Arab American feminisms essentially flourished in 1983 with the establishment of the Feminist Arab

American Network (FAN) which aimed at creating transnational bonds between Arab women in the United States and the Arab world. Likewise, it tackled the explicit stereotyping of Arabs in America. Carol Haddad, FAN's founder, gives explanation about the formation of the network as follows:

Our statement of purpose discussed the need for us to increase public awareness of issues affecting our lives, to work toward eliminating negative stereotypes of Arabs, to work in coalition with women in Arab countries, and to support each other. Part of the statement read: There is a critical need for Arab-American feminists to be visible in the feminist community. The U.S. feminist movement exists within, and has systematically suppressed information, news and research about the Arab world and Arab-American culture from an Arab perspective. The result is the portrayal of Arabs in negatively stereotypical ways, without regard for the wide range of cultures, religions, class and political affiliations in the twenty-one Arab states. (Kadi, 1994, p. 221)

This statements suggests that FAN firstly materialized as a response against the uncomplimentary reaction received by Arab American women when they called the National Women's Studies Association to denounce the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, which the United States had sustained.

Thus, Arab American women became conscious of their dismissal from the feminist concern together with the all-encompassing racism at the heart of mainstream feminism. Hence, they perceived the urgent need to fashion a detached form of feminism that would mutually undertake ethnic and women's issues. In her article, *The Invisible American Half: Arab American (1) Hybridity and Feminist Discourses in the 1990s*, Mervat F. Hatem (1998) maintains that The Feminist Arab-American Network thus became:

a loosely organized group of Arab American academics and activists who were committed to increase public awareness of issues affecting Arab American feminists, to eliminate negative stereotypes of Arabs particularly within the American feminist community and to work in a coalition with our sisters in Arab countries and to share resources and support among ourselves. (pp. 370-1)

Ultimately, FAN did pave the way for many Arab American women to become aware of each other's feminist apprehension. Likewise, it allowed Arab American feminists to become visible within American feminist communities. Indeed, starting from the 1990s Arab American feminism has become widely known and particularly as a consequence of the Persian Gulf War that lasted from August 2, 1990 to March 1, 1991. This latter manifested through an armed clash between Iraq and a group of allied countries from the United Nations and headed by the United States, who did fight to release Kuwait from the Iraqi incursion. It should be noted in this respect that there was a real confusion regarding the Arab American community in the United States. That is to say, this anti-Iraqi political discourse has turned to be an offensive anti-Arab discourse in the States as a whole despite the fact that the War was held in coalition with other Arab states such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Syria. Mervat F. Hatem (1998) perceives that, "These views indicated a deeply held belief that being both Arab and American was an oxymoron to the mainstream: one negated the other" (p. 373).

As a matter of fact, most of the accounts on the War tried to denigrate Arab culture mainly through media. As a result, many stereotypes proliferated and were widespread in mainstream culture such as: Arabs were portrayed as equivalently Muslim, anti-American, and mostly as (potential) terrorists. Ultimately, The Persian Gulf War made the transition by highlighting the complicated relation between Arab Americans and mainstream America.

Indisputably, the Arab community had previously attempted in several occasions to assimilate and amalgamate as white, at the same time; it had created connecting bridges with other minority groups. However, the War had put the traditional gender roles back to the fore, both, inside the United States and within the scope of its Arab communities. One should note that the chief concern being underscored by Arab American institutions and organizations throughout and even after the War was mainly racism; hence sexism was prevented and women were made deliberately indiscernible.

The persistence over struggling against prejudice did consciously, and sometimes unconsciously, obliterate women from the Arab American attempt to achieve integrity and fairness. Therefore, Arab American women figured out their invisibility and absence after the Persian Gulf War. This condition provided them with required force to organize in their effort to endorse gender justice and to let their voices to be voiced and heard.

Starting from the 1990s, various Arab American discourses emerged within Arab American women's communities. In her article "*The Invisible American Half, Hybridity and Arab American Feminist Consciousness in the 1990s*," Mervat F. Hatem highlighted three chief Arab American feminist discourses that flourished and, meticulously articulated, during that period. She refers to the first discourse as the "Arab American nationalist feminism," and in which most Arab American feminist narratives endorse an American nationalist viewpoint to characterize Arab American identity. That is to say, integration and assimilation within the American society is perceived by these feminists as the best means to struggle against Arab sexism. Interestingly, what they observe as non-tolerable in the Arab culture is exactly what mainstream American culture rejects and disapproves of, specifically, patriarchy and neo-patriarchy. This sort of feminism, according to Hatem reflected American traditional feminism, through advocating the same goals and intentions. This latter has been also referred to as "colonial feminism." In this respect, Leila Ahmed (1992) elucidates that "colonial feminism" first appeared in Victorian times, when the male institution made use of the language of feminism as a tool to depict other cultures as mediocre and inferior. This was typically the case of the Arab countries, where "colonial feminism" underscored and defended the representation of the oppressed women. Leila Ahmed (1992) perceives that:

The idea that Other men, men in colonized societies or societies beyond the borders of the civilized West, oppressed women was to be used, in the rhetoric of colonialism, to render morally justifiable its project of undermining or eradicating the cultures of colonized peoples. (p. 151)

In other words, “Arab American nationalist feminism” tracks the same grounds of “colonial feminism” and, consequently, does not promote the enhancement of the condition of women within both Arab and American cultures. It solely enhances Western conceptions and thus, dismantles the Arab component of Arab American identities. It is rather a feminist attempt towards assimilation and integration. Therefore, to some extent, it reflects those first Arab American immigrants who attempted to consider themselves as white in the late 19th and beginning 20th centuries.

The second type of Arab American feminism that Hatem focalises is “Arab American liberal feminism. This feminist discourse perceives that equal opportunities for women can be obtained through social restructuring. Yet, it simultaneously tackles politics in individualistic expressions and does not have trust in the likelihood of a radical alteration for Arab American women as a group. This discourse implies that it is “individual choices [that] can transcend problematic categories and realities” (Hatem, 1998, p. 384). This feminist discourse promotes as well the deconstruction of the conception of race. It believes that the conception of race is no longer feasible and attempts to afford in response a contestation of sexism in the Arab American environment whilst annihilating racism. This discourse considers that being labelled as women of color requires an upholding of racial assessments and politics. In other words, it regards the notions of “white women” and “women of color” as social constructs, and claims them as intrinsically racist. Additionally, it frequently tries to promote traditions without highlighting race. Hence, these feminists do not line up with women of color but strive, instead, to celebrate the Arab American inheritance without taking part in racial categorization. Ultimately, this sort of feminism originates from a conspicuous postmodern and postcolonial assessment of identity and feminism, as it trust the availability of a post-racial space in which personal decisions and opinions could alter.

The third discourse that Hatem refers to in her assessment of the expansion of Arab American feminisms in the 1990s could be referred to as Arab American women of color feminism. This latter emanates from a “self-conscious definition [of Arab American feminists] ... as members of an ethnic minority” (Hatem, 1998, p. 382). By creating coalitions among people of color, Arab American women will have the potential to exercise their political power. At the same time, they will have the possibility of investigating the interactions and junctions between their two cultures mainly through; affirming them, valuing them, and also passing judgments on them. As Hatem (1998) elucidates:

Arab American feminism has not sat comfortably within either [Arab or American] cultures. It offers a hybrid perspective with all that this adjective signifies: the ambiguous cultural character, the multiple cultural mutations, and the equally diverse politics. As such, it promises a conscious double critique of both the Arab and the American determinants of women’s experience/identity. (p. 383)

Likewise, it paves the path for the formation of a genealogy that includes women from diverse origins, thus, enabling a expansion of the politicization of Arab American women in their struggle to counter sexism and racism. In this respect, Bell Hooks (2015) perceives that, it is decisive to promote “critical awareness of the way racism and sexism are interlocking systems of domination” (p. 62), and this sort of feminism is very aware of that. Consequently, women that follow this appreciation of Arab American feminism will enquire the likelihood of adaptation and advocate the hybridity that results from being simultaneously Arab and American women.

Food for Our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists (1994), an Arab American anthology, could be regarded as an illustration of this type of feminism. The relevance of this book originated from the need of Arab American women in the 1990s to voice their feminism as a separate attempt among other American (women of color) feminisms. Certainly, the entire anthology abounds with references to the meeting points and similarities between Arab American feminists and other women of color. A clear example of this relationship could be highlighted in Michelle Sharif’s essay “*Global Sisterhood: Where Do We Fit In?*,” in which she openly promotes the need to adopt an Arab American feminism that allies itself with other women of color. In this respect, she argues:

Arab-Americans belong to both cultures and therefore occupy a unique position. We can and must help this dialogue develop. Our struggle, like all women of color, includes overcoming racism as well as sexism. By joining women’s groups in the United States, we can put issues such as anti-Arab racism on the agenda. Our time for recognition and respect in western feminist movements has come. (Kadi, 1994, p. 159)

As a matter of fact, ethnic feminist anthologies that give a voice to other women of color do correspondingly give power to feminist minorities. Therefore, in the introduction to *Food for Our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists* (1994), Kadi highlights the existing connection between this Arab American anthology and earlier related ethnic-feminist anthologies. The scarcity of an Arab American voice in the early 1980s was essentially due to the fact that Arab American feminists were fighting for visibility at that time and their interests were not materialised openly in public only until the 1990s. Thus, *Food for Our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists* (1994) could be regarded as the top Arab American feminist anthology.

In the introduction of *Food for Our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists*, Kadi (1994) considers this anthology as a map. He states that “I know it is possible and I believe it is necessary to create maps that are alive, many-layered, multi-dimensional, open-ended, and braided” (p. xiv). In other words, he highlights the uncertainty, the richness and the hybridity of the experiences of immigrants (those who live between two cultures mainly Arab

Americans). He also sheds light on those rich experiences through putting into question the conception of home in the diaspora:

Do transplants ever find home? Are we weakened by the ever-present feeling of not belonging in the west or the east, of having a foot in both worlds but no solid roots in either? Or are we stronger, more innovative and creative, able to make home in odd sites, able to survive in small, hard places, plants growing out of rocks? Perhaps this is our advantage, perhaps this is what we bring to the world. Find home wherever you can make it. Make home so you can find it wherever. (p. xv)

Despite the fact that the majority of published Arab American women writers are Christian and not Muslim, it is additionally quite important to point to Arab American Islamic Feminisms. In her article about the development of Arab American feminist discourses in the 1990s, Mervat F. Hatem does not refer to Islamic feminism. Nevertheless, it is really crucial to highlight the significance of many works by Arab American Muslim feminists since they also represented a fraction of the discourses prevailing in Arab American feminist environments. It is worth noting in this respect that works done by Islamic feminists are often assessed with much distrust and doubt. In other words, Muslim women, particularly those who put on a hijab, are even perceived by Arab American feminists as victims of gender domination, not as significant feminists.

Yet, Arab Muslim feminists are unquestionably leading a significant effort through offering re-readings of the Qur'an that put into question gender prejudiced readings and explanations of the holy text.

Lara Deeb (2005) sheds light on this subject in her article "*Silencing Religiosity: Secularity and Arab American Feminisms*," maintaining that, in some Arab (American) feminist surroundings, religiosity is perceived as rearward or irreconcilable with feminism (p. 204). Nonetheless, Deeb (2005) argues that trying to ignore or make to Muslim feminists invisible in Arab American feminist environments matches exactly what white American feminisms are advocating. It literally denotes trying to hush a particular feminist voice in their fight for social parity. As Deeb (2005) elucidates: "the silencing of, and assumptions about, religiosity in Arab American feminist circles, to a certain extent, mirror particular problematic aspects of certain liberal white feminists in the United States" (p. 205). Consequently, it is crucial for Islamic feminisms to turn into a significant fraction of the conversation when discussing issues related to Arab American feminisms. Being absent from this conversation will forwardly endorse a vilification of Islam that consolidates mainstream clichéd perceptions of Muslim / Arab cultures.

4. Post-9/11 Arab American Feminisms: Confirmation and Confrontation Against Demonization

Interest in feminist concerns also rose subsequently to the terrorist attacks to the World Trade Center and the Pentagon which were responsible for many sufferings of Arab American communities. Networks of commonality occurred as a consequence of the hypervisibilization of Arabs and Muslims in post-9/11 United States. Nadine Naber (2012) perceives that, "the aftermath of September 11th expanded the possibilities for coalition building among activists" (p. 218). Nonetheless, due to the hypervisibilization of Arabs after 9/11, and the demonization of Arab masculinities, there was a succeeding ill-treatment of Arab women too. This demonization of Arab American women is mainly due to the prevailing power structures and the biased discourses widespread in the United States at the start of the 21st century which involved a persecution of Arab women against the accused patriarchy of Arab men often perceived as terrorists.

Clearly, the alteration of Arabs/Arab Americans from invisibility to visibility within racial justice discourses and movements was responsible for the decisive changes in multi-racial coalition-building. Muslim feminists have also arranged themselves after 9/11, and have pushed the issue of the hijab to the fore as a visible strategy to voice their concerns. In her article "*The Political and Cultural Representations of Arabs, Arab Americans, and Arab American Feminisms after September 11, 2001*," Mervat F. Hatem, argues that:

[i]mmmediately after September 11, Muslim women emerged as the earliest targets of anti-Muslim and anti-Arab violence and were the first to successfully organize against it. They used their Muslim attire, which gave them away, as a means of educating Americans in general about their experiences and their religion. (p. 23)

To put it differently, the hijab has been employed after 9/11 by Arab American Muslim feminists as a political strategy to counter the denigration of Islam and as a means to declare liberty of expression. It is important in this respect to mention that not all Arab American feminists consented on this, as a number of them would perceive the hijab as a mark of oppression. Others, more old-fashioned, would also be against its activist purpose, as they would deem the political use of a religious representation as divergent from their religious practices (Hatem, 2008, pp. 23-4). Yet, it is essential to consider that Muslim American feminists also arranged themselves to fight against prejudices of Islamic religion.

As a matter of fact, Arabs and Muslims have been expelled from mainstream culture and social media for a long time mainly through the stereotyping strategies of experts in the Middle East as a medium to promote their foreign policy agendas. So, they were most of the time identified as an unwelcome "Other" in the US. These distorted depictions were circulating at most in intentional mythmaking tactics of film and media. Likewise, since the 1960s, Arabs have been non-officially perceived as terrorists by the US government. Their situation has become worse after 9/11 and they have been regarded since then as a dangerous threat to the US national security.

5. The Shehrazadian Narrative in Contemporary Arab American Women's Writing

The Shehrazadian narrative in contemporary Arab American women's writing engulfs several features and illustrations of confrontation and resistance to the stereotypical representations of Arab women, mainly in popular American culture. Indeed, Shehrazade and her narrative strategies become in this context a collective means for reviving and redefining grandmother figures from the past. Shehrazade's storytelling, as a life-serving strategy, becomes a metaphor for the urgency of exploring why and how figures like Shehrazade are translated across cultures and how Orientalism shapes such translation.

In this respect, I try to shed light on how Shehrazadian narrative is adopted to cultural translation in the examples of Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent* (2003) and Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* (2007). This narrative strategy, as will be shown, has ultimately been adapted to the needs of the literary context in diaspora. Shehrazadian orality will be scrutinized as a medium for cultural negotiation. Both Laila Halaby and Diana Abu-Jaber rewrite their identities in relation to a scattered variety of Arab American identities, echoing a diversity of collective identity. One of the acts of translations both novelists seek to convey when employing Shehrazadian narrative is their attempt at questioning past and contemporary imperialist racial politics process monitoring cultural and current translations. Both writers play an important role in shaping the identity politics in diaspora.

To start with, Scheherazade's popularity in the West offers a way to first gain visibility through an auto-orientalist adaptation of popular US notions of Muslim womanhood and then the possibility to re-write Muslim women's subject positions. Muslim women across the world have adapted Scheherazade's tales orally, forgoing censorship of official written versions and creating their own local feminist twists. Recent generations of Muslim women writers have taken up the challenge that comes with the changing currency the Scheherazade figure has both in the 'West' and the 'East'. "As a result of her journeys between East and West, Shahrazad has become a powerful trope for contemporary Arab and Muslim women writers, particularly those who address international audiences" (Gauch, 2007, pp. xi). Scheherazade's visual link to orientalist discourses is so overdetermined that the use of only her image may reinforce Western stereotypes, and also handicap Muslim women writers fighting gender inequality in Muslim majority countries, where feminist agency could be perceived as a Western intervention. I believe a successful/strategic auto-orientalist citation of her figure needs to return to her voice beyond her image. In other words, a re-placement of the orientalist image for Scheherazade as an author, a Muslim women and agent may cite and translate Scheherazade's multidirectional, boundary crossing legacy transculturally and trans-temporally. For Rothberg (2009), multidirectionality depends on triggers, aesthetic, political or otherwise, that spark and produce memory across temporal, spatial and then by definition as well national boundaries and imagined communities in that acts of "remembrance both cuts across and binds together diverse spatial, temporal, and cultural sites" (p. 11). In literature such a multidirectional aesthetic might provide a platform for minority writers to articulate their struggles through more prominent, widely understood memories or tropes thereof. This is not to say that these two different contexts collapse, but the citation is structural, for example, modern Scheherazades might cite the agency and transnational currency of the original figure or of Eastern/Western adaptations and translate these structures into their respective and different present contexts.

6. On the Relationship Between Food Trope and Storytelling in Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent*

Through the food trope, Abu-Jaber raises the multifaceted issues of belonging, identity and ethnicity. Food functions as a multifarious language for triggering memory and nostalgia and for beautifully communicating love and exile for immigrant characters in the US. Diana Abu-Jaber skilfully employs the storytelling technique through the character of Sirine's uncle. In this respect, Mercer and Strom observe that "the two trajectories [food and storytelling] intersect in the kitchen, where she [Sirine] feeds him the Arabic food he loves and he [her uncle] feeds her the Scherazade-like tale of his great Aunt Camille and her son Abdelrahman Salahadin's adventures in a fantastical Arabian landscape" (Abu-Jaber, 2007, p. 7). Indeed, both food and storytelling turn out to be essential basics in the quest for identity as they mutually trigger feelings of nostalgia toward unreachable moments of Arab homeland often connected with food and *The Arabian Nights*. Definitely, Diasporic Shehrazadian narrative and its orality is hence a particularly productive space of analysis because of its defiance of pure social formations and totalizing theories of affiliations" (Sabri, 2011, pp. 24-5). Besides, Arab Americans, "While they have become assimilated into American society over time, [they] tend to retain certain cultural traditions [such as food ways of homeland and storytelling] that reflect their unique heritages" (Sabri, 2011, p. 144). In other words, food has become a site of cultural negotiations through which Abu-Jaber investigates the mix of identity meditations.

In Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land*, the organization of the story represents a significant structural tool of the story. In the opening and closing scenes, Halaby employs the fairytale frame in the structure of her novel. Both parts start with the traditional transliteration of the Arabic phrase "*kan ya ma kan fee qadeem az-zamaan*" ("There was and there wasn't in olden times") which is typical to Shehrazadian Narrative. "Before" immerses the reader to the story of Jassim and Salwa and sets up the time framework for the novel as instantly in the aftermath of 9/11 drastic events. Furthermore, it shows that both Jassim and Salwa, like the majority of Muslims, are enduringly affected by the events because they are both Arab and Muslim. The final part of the novel entitled "After" proceeds in similar manner as the first one, making use of the fairy tale recipe "*kan ya ma kan fee qadeem az-zamaan*." This seeks to enclose the story of Jassim and Salwa's hardships and views of America as a component of a fairy tale. In this closing section, neither Salwa nor Jassim are referred to straight, but both are

entailed in the fairy tale of “Nus Nsays”, which is related at an earlier level in the novel by Salwa’s Grandmother. Both, the fairytale story and the novel close with: “There’s no ‘they lived happily ever after’”? ‘Happily ever after’ happens only in American fairy tales. *Wasn’t this an American fairy tale?* It was and it wasn’t (Abu-Jaber, 2007, p. 335).” Significantly, this reference together with the intertext of the novel within the tale of “Nus Nsays”, highlight the suggestion that America does not signify home for everyone and that the ‘American Dream’ narrative that anyone can attain a sense of belonging is just a fairytale.

Throughout the novel, the notion of America as a Promised Land is questioned and dismantled. Perceiving America as the Promised Land has always been a taken-for-granted construct in the minds of its dreamy hopeful immigrants. Captivatingly, the novel deconstructs this mythical idealistic conception and lays bare the miserable reality of Arab immigrants in the US. To put it differently, America has turned to be a fake Promised Land because Salwa and Jassim’s experience (and the experience of other immigrants, especially Arab and Muslim immigrants) confronts this likelihood. The Promised Land designates a room of inclusive belonging, which America fails to afford to both protagonists and ultimately to the rest of Arab Muslim Americans.

7. Conclusion

The post-disciplinary paradigm of post-9/11 Arab-American writings requires a careful introspection of the political stereotypical discrimination and the social empathy that led to its emergence.

Shehrazadian narrative is regarded as a medium for cultural negotiation between East and West. Both Laila Halaby and Diana Abu-Jaber rewrite their identities in relation to a scattered variety of Arab American identities, echoing a diversity of collective identity. One of the acts of translations both novelists seek to convey when employing Shehrazadian narrative is their attempt at questioning past and contemporary imperialist racial politics process monitoring cultural and current translations.

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