



# Diasporic Arab Woman between Assimilation and Conservation with Reference to Laila Halaby's West of the Jordan

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## Abstract

This paper examines the representation of diasporic Arab female writers' experience in the American society. The paper discusses the diasporic identity and consciousness in Arab diasporic fiction in the United States. It also traces the ways in which Arab diasporic women encounter the sense of otherness and multiple forms of exclusion that builds their estrangement in the diaspora. The study draws on several theoretical models such as cultural assimilation and trauma. However the three female characters in the novel reconstruct identity through interaction between old homeland and the new host society and between the eastern culture and the western culture. It reflects how they appear as a hyphenated subjects, depicting the challenge of cultural conflict and the sense of displacement. This paper tries to answer questions like: Are the Arab diasporic female characters able to assimilate and integrate with American culture?, Are they able to compromise between their Arabic traditional cultures of their Homeland with the culture of the host land? and Does American culture affect the behavior of these female Arab Immigrants? The paper exposes the hybridity and diversity of these Arab diasporic female characters. The character Hala desires to be accepted by the American people, experiencing as a consequence, a kind of frustrated assimilation. The conflict between what she experiences in America and what her family wants her to be. Also the paper sheds light on the stereotypes of the Arab immigrants in the American society. It shows how the character Khadija suffers the acculturation and how she couldn't adjust herself with her American friends and their open sexual relationships which are against her Arabic culture.

**Key Words:** Diaspora, Arab, Female, Cultural encounter, Assimilation, Hyphenated, Conservation

## Argument

*"I tell them what they want to hear which is nasty stories about young men sticking their things into goats and some twelve years 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"(West of the Jordan 24).*

### Introduction: Critical Overview

This paper is concerned with literary and postcolonial aspects of resistance, identity, negotiation, assimilation and conversation as concepts through which to approach representations of postcolonial conflicts in contemporary Arab-Anglophone women's writings. Arab immigrants arrived to the United States in 1870. This is the first wave of Arab immigrants who are mostly general people looking for good fortune. An important leader of this patch was Gibran Khalil Gibran. Those immigrants came as sojourners not intending to stay in America however, they found themselves living in a heavily assimilationist US context. (Majaj p 1). While they struggled a lot to conserve their Arabian identity. Most of them are Christians and that what you can observe in their newspapers and magazines about how to preserve their Arab culture, identity and personality in their following generation.

The second wave was from 1920s to 1960s. Most of them were Muslims and they came mostly from Palestine, Egypt, Lebanon and Iraq. Those immigrants escape the war in their countries and the tyrannical systems in their countries. Those immigrants were more educated, cultured and freedom activists.

The third wave was from 1962 to 2010. Most of those immigrants are Palestinians during Alnakbah in 1967, war of 6 days and more than eight hundred thousand people arrived in America. Also after the beginning of the Lebanese civil war. 1975-1990. Lebanese people immigrated to United States in large groups escaping the war and looking for a safe way of life. From those three different waves of Arab immigrants to the USA, we can notice the diversity of the people who arrived the American land. Steven Slaita in his book *'Modern Arab American Fiction'* says:, "not all Arab Americans are Muslims and Christians, though the community includes Druze, Bahia, Jews, also a small number is Muslim include both Sunni and Shia and the Christian Catholic and Orthodox". (Slaita 9). Salaita emphasizes the diversity of Arab American society and wanted to correct the common stereotype of Arab in

America that most of them are Arab and Muslims. This diversity in Arab American immigrants created diverse and broad values, principles, and culture.

In this paper, we will illustrate some of these cultural values of three characters in the novel of Laila Halaby. A Jordanian American writer who spends her life between Jordan and America. "*West of the Jordan*" written by Laila Halaby who was born in Lebanon to a Jordanian father and American mother. Halaby moved to America as a baby then returned to Lebanon to study folklore. She spends her life between America and Jordan and she calls herself as an Arab and American. She is devastated between two cultures Arab and American, that's why most of her novels discuss the cultural conflict between the East and the West. She writes poetry and she writes two novels "*Once in a promised land*" (2007) and the other novel "*West of the Jordan*" (2003); our topic of study is "*West of the Jordan*" published by Beacon Press. The diasporic issues and the cultural conflicts are ones of the main themes of the novel. The novel manipulated the lives, friendships, and love of girls, struggling with National ethnic and sexual identities. The feeling of estrangements, otherness and trauma in the host country.

By chasing the life of the three female characters in the novel we will get a window into the rich and complicated Arab world. Hala, Khadija and Soraya are three cousins, all of them live in America except Mawal, the fourth female cousin, who is not diasporic like them, still stable living in the security of Palestinian traditional way of life in the West Bank in their original village Nawara. Mawal is a kind of a balance for all the three other cousins who are diasporic characters living in America. She is a kind of a back support or a reference for all her cousins.

Hala is torn between Jordan and America living in Arizona but she loves Jordan. She is devastated between here and there. She loves the way of life in Arizona but she still wants to be in Jordan. Hala is torn between two worlds. Khadija is amazed by the sexual freedom of her American friends. Soraya and her struggle to be accepted by the American people and her constant trial of assimilation but her trials went in vain. Through this literary investigation in this novel, we will see the ways in which Arab American women struggle to maintain a cultural attachment to the traditions of their Homeland. Hala wants to establish a life in the United States without losing the truck of her roots in Jordan but we can't say this for Soraya and Khadija because both of them don't have strong connections to Palestine. When analyzing the three female characters in the novel regarding a matter of positioning and locating oneself in relation to different types of cultural formations such as ethnicity, class, race, gender, and

sexuality. Also, we must consider the ambivalent attitude found in the life of the three cousins who have Arabic cultural background families and they live and undergo a different American life. The three diasporic women characters of *West of the Jordan* will be explained in the light of their different traits and aspects.

The three diasporic female cousin characters looking for self-actualization if we begin with Khadija, it could be said that the father of Khadija in the "*West of the Jordan*" seems to reinforce some Arabic male stereotypes as an oppressive father. If we trace the behavior of Khadija's father in the novel we will be able to display some aspects of his personality as a rough father. Although Khadija sometimes feels pity for him when he tells her about his dreams and how they were flying in the air like balloons but America filled them with sand. Khadija says: "I wish my father wouldn't tell me these things" (37). Once her father forces her to drink whiskey, then he takes her to her mother and says "Oh Mother of Shit, your little dog of a daughter has been drinking. Smell her mouth" (38). Her mother directly slaps her. Khadija tried to tell her that he forced her to drink but the father says: "A drinker and a liar" (39). Then he started beating her.

Khadija feels a kind of subjugation by her family especially her mother. When Khadija says "I am American" (74) her mother really gets mad shouting "You are Palestinian and you should be proud of that" (74). "No daughter of mine is American" (74). Her mother cried. As third generation immigrant and born in America she can't speak Arabic, Khadija feels that she is completely American. Her teacher in the school expects her to know more than other students in the class as her parents are foreigners, though there are lots of other kids in the class who are not American themselves. She wants to scream at him "I am just as American as anyone here" (74). Her Auntie Mysoun exclaims how Khadija's mother let her children speak English at home. How she treats them like American children and cooks American food for them, and how she lets them talk back to her. Auntie Mysoun assures that if her children Tariq or Soraya did like that "they would get be beating" (105).

Khadija's father stands as a barrier in front of her assimilation process of American culture. Laila Halaby divulges this in the novel when we see Khadija's mother tells her that her father is traditional man, that's why he is so harsh and authoritarian and that's why "I'm not allowed to talk to boys" (149), Khadija says. The authoritative and patriarchal father is clearly exposed in Khadija's description of her mother when she becomes angry from the troublesome behavior of children. "Like wild dogs with ticks in your asses" (149). her mother screams. Khadija

says that her mother doesn't say this when her father is there because "he doesn't think woman should swear and he will slap her if she does."(149). Halaby wants to unveil the oppression of male on female in Arab traditional families through the character of Khadija's father. Khadija wants to change her name to Diana because she thinks her name is difficult for her American friends in the class. She says: "In America my name sounds like someone throwing up or falling off a bicycle....if they can get the first part of it like the "Kha" part, it comes out like clearing your throat after eating ice-cream" (37). Halaby is criticizing the Muslim traditional families and how they name their children after the names of famous religious symbols. Khadija wants her classmates, to call her Diana because Diana is beautiful and a "pretty western name" (37). Khadija wants to assimilate western culture and wants to be a complete American but sometimes she faces problems and things which are against principles she was always hearing in her unassimilating immigrant family.

Halaby presented some social and cultural problems in the life of orient female in US. when Khadija told her mother that her friend Jennifer's brother Mickey is named after the singer Mick Jagger, a famous American musician, her mother says "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). Halaby displays the diversity of Arab women in America as Khadija is accepting and assimilating this Western concept, on the other hand, her mother is not able to believe it. Khadija is criticizing Arab naming their sons after their famous religious symbols and she encourages the Western society naming their children after singers.

Another point affecting the acculturation process in the life of Khadija is the openness and wild freedom of her friends in America. Her friend Jennifer and her nasty magazines of her brother is something Khadija herself described it as an acceptable, saying "and I know that I shouldn't be looking at them"(151). She knows that she mustn't watch the nasty and naked pictures in the magazine of Jennifer. When her mother discovers her watching the nasty magazines, "she slapped my face, cursed me, cursed America, cursed my father and cursed God" (152), Khadija said. Halaby wants to present the reaction of a traditional conservative family towards the bad behavior of their sons. When Khadija asks her mother permission to go to a slumber party she directly refuses, saying "You are not going to sleep anywhere outside this family until the day you are married" (173). Khadija knows that she will refuse and she knows that if she asks her father he will directly hit her. When Khadija told her friend Pasty that her mother refused, Pasty laughed at her saying "How are you ever going to have sex with a boy if you always have to

sleep at home" (173). Khadija was amazed to hear that easiness in the matter of sex and open friendships of Pasty exclaiming "I have never thought about sex with a boy before I get married"(173). Khadija knows that American girls do that and even probably her cousins Soraya does that, but she thinks that she is different. Halaby unravels the traditional secrets of the Arabian families, how mothers are cautious about the virginity of their daughters and how they consider it as an important thing and as an honor for the family. Khadija's mother warns her from boys and friendships especially American boys and how they will take the secret thing between her legs for nothing saying "Your husband has to be the one to take it from you"(179). Otherwise, you are a disgrace to us and we are stuck with you forever"(179). Halaby exposed the issue of virginity and hymen as a symbol of virtue to a girl before marriage and as one of the main factors in the success of Marriage. When Khadija saw her friend Pasty sleeping together with Michael, her American boyfriend. She couldn't imagine that and she said "I felt horrible like can't see and can't think"(179), then she left the room quickly without collecting her books. She went home crying and fell sick for three days from the trauma.

The second character in the novel is Soraya who is represented by Halaby as an example of the Eastern Arab woman who tried to acculturate and assimilate American culture, though all her trials, she couldn't overcome the Western stereotype of Arabs. Soraya struggles to be American but she couldn't and feels despair to such a degree that she stops arguments and decides to tell her American friends what they want to hear, and what they expect to hear. She says "I tell them what they want to hear which is nasty stories about young men sticking their things into goats and some twelve years 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). Halaby gives a clear description how the western society looks at Arabs. Halaby records decades of negative cliches and discrimination and to explore the features of her ethnic native history. Soraya breaks the convention of her Arab culture and adopts Western values. Her Mother thinks that she is a bad girl. Soraya says "she is always comparing us and telling me what good girls are and how I am just a headache" (25). Her mother's Arabic cultural background wouldn't accept her loose behaviors Surya wants to enjoy herself opposing to her sister Pauline, who, though she has an American name, is very conservative.

Halaby reinforces the diversity of Arab American girls through the female characters in the novel "*West of the Jordan*". Though they are cousins, Khadija and Soraya are completely different. Soraya is

open minded and she wants to enjoy herself regardless the restrictions of her parent's will and their Arabic preservative background. Soraya likes going to wedding parties, she dances well and better than any other girls in the family. When her mother shows the film of Jalal wedding party. Soraya dances shamelessly and move her back in a sexy way. Her cousin Jaffer is astonished while watching "like those boys who are at school who stare at the posters of naked ladies in their lockers" (27). Jaffer says "Wow she knows how shake it .she is really shaking it". He asks his mother who is the girl. Soraya's mother felt shame and try to change the conversation .Halaby supported the idea of cultural shock. Soraya's mother tells her daughter "it is not proper to behave like that, like a loose woman". Halaby depicted the suffering of Arab mothers trying to protect their daughters from assimilating the western culture, and this is clear in the family restraints in the life the of three female cousins.

From all the above-mentioned analysis of the attitudes and behaviors of Soraya, we can infer that she underwent a frustrated assimilation although, she deprived herself of all Arab culture restrictions and liberate herself from many Arabic values trying to be accepted by the American Society, but she finished with frustration. In the end, she realized that a complete assimilation is a fallacy and can't be achieved. That's why she finally directed herself back to her roots in Arabia.

Hala is the third character in the novel. She moves from Jordan to America to escape the traditional mockery of her family. She wants to liberate herself from old fashion thoughts of her family in Jordan. We can see this clearly as her father is hiding her books and telling her to read only School books. Her Aunt Suha, tells her mother "you shouldn't let her do this, or no one will marry her"(8), Hala herself says "I was so tired of being made fun of for reading, for being too headstrong, for speaking my mind"(9). The Arabian traditional society couldn't expect a girl who is interested in reading in this way and has this strong character who expresses her thoughts bravely. These features of Hala are very queer, unusual, and unfamiliar and not appropriate to a patriarchal environment. Patriarchal Society, which expects a girl to marry and take care of her children. Halaby exposes the thoughts of the traditional Arab family parents who are very careful and ambitious to find husbands to their daughters at the end of their Secondary School. Arabic society considers a girl as a burden, and when the family finds a husband for the girl they relax from that burden. Hala's father doesn't allow her to travel to America to live with her uncle Hamdi

and his American wife easily. Only her mother insisted and told him if she stays here in Jordan she will rot as her sister Latifah and as her mother, she says: "if Hala stays here she will rot like me and like Latifah. Look at us. We have rotted. Let Hala grow and dream"(9). Halaby wants to hint that Jordan environment is not suitable for girls like Hala who is active and all the time reading. Maybe if she moves to America she will achieve her dreams. When Hala comes back to Jordan to attend the funeral of her mother. Most of the visitors in her house imagine her coming back for marriage not for death as she says: "I know that they see me with curious eyes. I left before marriage 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 shouldn't wear blue jeans and extremely unfeminine dresses"(77). As Aunt Suha says: "I should stop using English words. Nila, one of my classmates at school just married and already pregnant. I'm unconnected"(77).

This is what the Arab society expect the girl to do when she finishes Secondary School. Men and women in her environment in Jordan consider Hala as something unfamiliar as she is having short hair, tight pants and blue jeans. All these things are strange and she mustn't do that. Her classmate Nila, is married and pregnant now so she must be like her. She must start her life as a woman. Hala finds it very difficult to endure life under the constant criticism and the censorship of her society's limitation in Jordan.

When her father himself tells her in the second day of her mother funeral: "Hala! it is time for you to be with your family, for you to finish your study here, I am sure you understand, you must think of your family now and plan to put your roots here as a woman"(45). Hala understands from his questions that he wants her to marry and to be a woman. Hala says: "a screen lifted from my eyes I was to replace my mother with a husband. I was to stay in Jordan forever, marry, engage.....have children. Be someone else's burden,"(45.) This is what Hala understands from her father's speech he wants her to marry and be a mother he proves to be like many fathers in Jordan who think in a traditional way, but Hala wants to escape from the control of her father and her society, the society in which women Independence and activeness is not stimulated. Hala gathers her courage and tells her father I will go with my uncle Hamdi and his wife Fay, she says: "if I stay here, I will kill myself I will go to my mother and you will have the blood of two people on your hands"(45). Then she travels back to America. The contact of Hala to the American culture makes her brave and she could confront her father. She became bolder and transgressive

more than she used to be. She flies to America thinking that she loses both of her parents in one week.

Halaby wants to present the ambivalent attitude of Arab female immigrants in the United States. Though Hala fights with her father and refuses to stay in Jordan. Now, after three years she returns in order to watch her dying grandmother in the first day back in Jordan Hala mentions that she feels a very good relief to be in her own country again. She feels a kind of comfort in Jordan more than in the United States. She says: "there is a comfort to be in my own house, to wake up in my own language"(77) Halaby wants to expose this feeling and thoughts of this diasporic character, how Hala who is eager and craves to live in the United States feels so comfortable when she comes home to Arabia. She feels a kind of belonging mixed with displacement. Hala feels that her way of dressing and behavior is not in accordance to what her society in Jordan expect from her. She explains: "I feel a feeling of relief and fatigue to be back....I know they see me in a curious eyes.....I am unconnected"(77). Hala feels that she is unconnected to her own homeland anymore she feels a kind of estrangement, she feels as a foreigner in her hometown. Halaby wants to prove that the impact of the American culture is proved in the life of Hala to such degree that she cannot pretend to be someone she is not. In fact, this feeling of not belonging is something common in the mind of Arab diasporic characters when they return to their homelands.

The relationship of Hala and Sharif makes a kind of a change in her attitude towards Arabic culture. This strange hidden relation of admiration and love works as a balance and as a mediator between her assimilated American culture and her Arab culture. Sharif connects Hala to her Arabic culture when he starts showing her all the places in Jordan. She starts trusting him and she sees everything in Jordan in a different way. From the first moment they meet again, Hala immediately feels that something is about to change. She says: "I feel a wave inside of me as though a giant change is about to occur"(119). This big change, we can say is the fact that Hala would fall in love with Sharif. We can say that memories and old connections of Hala to her own homeland and her reminiscences play a basic role in compromising her attitude towards Arabic culture. In addition to that, the days Hala spends in Irbid and the stories told by uncle Abo Salwan about the Arab world, deserts and villages create a kind of reacquaintance with the Arab culture. Finally by wearing her mother "roza" a Palestinian dress when flying to America is a symbol that implies she is happy staying connected to her roots. By wearing the "roza" close to her body without any

clothes under it, to make it label to her body suggests that she wants to preserve her own Arabic culture very close to her than the American one and she wants to prove that she is still connected to her Jordanian roots.

### **Conclusion:**

Arab Anglophone writers use English to express their thoughts because they think that their mother tongue, the language of their homeland suppressed them and they want to show the people around them what they are. In a society a woman is considered not equal to a man, Arab woman writers find the west as a savior and moves from invisibility to visibility. How Hala is suffering in Jordan under the sovereignty of a Bedouin, conservative and patriarchal society and how she becomes free in the states. On the other hand How Khadija and Soraya suffer the marginalization and bad stereotype of Arabs in the United States. Hala and Soraya, though their constant trails to take off the shackles of Arabian values and try to assimilate a complete way of life, but they couldn't get acceptance in the American society.

The interaction between old homeland and new host society and between the Eastern society and the Western culture reconstruct the identity and the affect the personality of the Arab diasporic immigrants. The diasporic Arab women feel a kind of otherness devastated between two different cultures. The failure of a complete assimilation in the American Society. Arab female characters suffer the bad stereotyping of the host culture. How the three female young characters find it difficult to compromise between home and the host culture. Arab diasporic female characters feel a sense of displacement when they return to their Homeland. They feel that their behavior is not as it is expected by their families at home. Though some Arab female character try their best to acculturate themselves and to assimilate the western culture trying to be American but the consequence is a frustrated assimilation. How parents struggle to conserve their Arabian identity and inherit it to their second generation. The difficulty in balancing between what your family wants and expects you to be and what Western environment requires from you to be part of it. The cultural trauma and how Khadija finds that she can't adjust herself to what her American classmates do and how she is shocked by their open sexual relationships. The diversity of Arab woman characters in America and how each one of the three cousins has her own beliefs, her own way of life and her own interests. The shackles of the patriarchal society upon the three female characters and how fathers want their daughters to

marry early. Hala's contact to American culture strengthens her and gives her courage to stand bravely in front of her domineering father and she becomes able to decide her future and travel to America again to complete her life away from patriarchal, authoritarian and masculine society.

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