The Poetics of Transnational Belonging, Displacement and Fragmented Identities in Layla Halaby’s *West of The Jordan*

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Abstract

The narrative of four Arab female protagonists, Mawal, Soraya, Khadija and Hala tackled in Layla Halaby’s *West of The Jordan* (2003) depicts the complexities of transnational belonging and fragmented identities for Arab American women physically and psychically displaced between America and Palestine. These female characters live in an in-between space where they vacillate between the Arab and American cultures. While they yearn to clinch to their Arab inheritance, they cannot identify with the patriarchal aspects of this culture. On the other hand, they cannot wholly belong to the American culture, which often rejects them because of racial and ethnic differences. They all strive to reconcile fragmented American identities with the cultural intricacies of being Arab American women. Three of these women (Soraya, Khadija and Hala) are dislocated by their geographic location, facing the challenge of having to find their path in a new hostland western culture. They hardly try to fit in and sustain their lives in the “contact zone” where “disparate cultures, meet, clash and grapple with each other” (Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* 23). Mawal, their Palestinian cousin, on the other hand, has never left her homeland Palestine, yet, feels displaced by the pressure of political and mental colonization of her land by the Jewish occupier.

Keywords: Poetics, Transnational belonging, Displacement, Fragmented identities
Introduction

Laila Halaby, the author, poet, and children’s book writer is an Arab American of Lebanese and Jordanian descent. Her works, including her first novel, *West of the Jordan* (2003), reflect on issues of displacement, migration, exile, and racial belonging. Like much of the Arab American women’s literature, I discuss throughout this paper, the way Layla Halaby’s writing seeks to provide American readers with insights into the complexities surrounding Arab American women lives.

To start with, Through *West of the Jordan*, the Arab American novelist Laila Halaby highlights the multifariousness of the experiences of Arab women through an interrelated net of youthful Arab women’s narratives. More importantly, I perceive that through the storytelling technique that the novelist skilfully uses in this novel, the four narrators in the novel manage to disclose a multitude of different meaningful episodes of their lives. They tend to portray their daily experiences and to show how the intersections of gender, race, class, ethnicity and religion crucially inform their lives whether in Palestine (in the village of Nawara) or in America. Steven Salaita draws attention to, despite the fact that the four girls in *West of the Jordan* share “an identical cultural origin and belong to the same extended family, each is vastly different than the other three in disposition and personal circumstance” (135). The fragmentation of the structure of the novel seeks to highlight each story of the four female narrators on its own. Each independent story crucially sheds light on the dilemma surrounding the identities of the four teenage narrators within an Arab and Arab American cultural context. According to Paul Gilroy, the scrutiny of one’s cultural identity endows with a means of assessing the interchange between “our subjective experiences of the world and the cultural and historical settings in which that fragile subjectivity” takes shape. For him, identity “is ‘always particular, as much about difference as about shared belonging’.

I. The Poetics of Transnational Belonging

I employ the word poetics to refer to a methodical theory that attempts to define the nature of Arab women novels, the principles that rule them, the themes that differentiate them and the circumstances that have paved the way to their production. A transnational poetics denotes a poetics based on a commitment with the confusing confrontations of a seemingly borderless world, in which the novelist manages to get rid of nationally enclosed identities and approaches her novel as an creative product that defy the claims of universality. In *The Blackwell Guide to Literary Theory*, Gregory Castle defines cultural poetics or the poetics of culture as the way

often used to describe the methodologies of cultural criticism in New Historicism and textualist anthropology. Sometimes referred to as *poetics of culture*, this perspective calls into question the objectivity or scientific status that anthropology and other disciplines claim for their representations. It argues that all representations of culture are determined by the same linguistic constraints and freedoms that govern aesthetic discourse. (309)

Laila Halaby struggles through her narrative with the freedom and demands of merging within the American culture. On the one hand, she defies difference in her poetics in such a way that it ends up being radicalized. She also opts to bridge cultures and languages to
create a new kind of American poetics. In the same vein, as she faces the legacy of civil rights infringement and devaluation of women in Palestine, she attempts to provide voice to the disenfranchised and establishes linkages with like-minded writers from other countries. What I argue to be the transnational features in Laila Halaby’s *West of the Jordan* are the following interrelated themes: highlighting formal variations and insertion of manifold literary and linguistic traditions; questioning the role of the female narrators’ memories and consciousness in forging certain forms and structures; challenging the politics of location within national, local, and gendered borders; and a dynamic understanding of matters of audience, i.e. the production and reception of this narrative. According to Steven Salaita, “*West of the Jordan* is a title that denotes both geography and political orientation. On the one hand, it directs readers’ attention to the West Bank and to the geopolitical West, the United States in particular. On the other hand, it identifies a locus of concerns that combine an emphasis on the United States and the Middle East” (79-80).

The novel defies and deconstructs the stereotypical homogenized representations of Arab women. It also explores the distinctiveness of each character in order to investigate their gendered features within a larger framework of identity, such as Arab American or Palestinian. In her interview with Steven Salaita, Halaby admits: “I find it endlessly interesting to explore people’s paradoxes and try to understand their motivations, to look not just at the character of this moment in this scene, but how the character got there, what influenced the character, and what choices the character made prior to the reader meeting up with her/him” (Salaita). So, Halaby’s depiction stems essentially from the context that shapes the identities and behaviors of her female characters.

While the stories by Arab women writers portray the experience of “growing up female in traditional Arab society” (Cohen 8), Laila Halaby’s *West of the Jordan*, depicts the experiences of Arab American women growing up in America. They are enduring the obligations and restrictions of an Arab identity demands in the West. They all strive to fit in the category of ‘good Arabian girls’. Adding to this, they face the burden of racial stereotypes and are deemed to obey male authority (in particular the figure of an authoritarian father such as the case of Khadija’s father).

II. Displacement and Fragmented Female Identities in Layla Halaby’s *West of The Jordan*

II.1. Khadija and Her Sense of Loss and Displacement

Khadija’s first story ‘Sand and Fire’ initiates some of the patterns that shape Khadija’s manners and inform her insight of the world around her. Khadija thinks her name is a source of nuisance for her in the US and she wishes she could have a different one. Right at the beginning of Khadija’s unfolding; she starts by giving a positive account on the origin of her name by probing into its Islamic roots. She mentions 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 stresses the amount of respect and love that surrounded the life of the prophet’s wife. Later on, however, Khadija underscores the ugly reality of her Arabic name in America: “In America my name sounds like someone throwing up of 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 ridiculous disparity 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” (Aguiar 33). She is aware of the misapprehension that the contrast between her Arabic name and her white features are likely to trigger in the minds of their American friends and teachers. She chiefly has to endure her father’s rudeness and lack of responsibility, which he thinks is due to his unsuccessful American dream. Khadija points out that her 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). Khadija’s father worked as a part-time mechanic is addicted to alcoholic drinks.

In Global Cities, Mark Abrahamson perceives that “[a]lthough immigrants are often viewed negatively because they are culturally different, the reality is that they routinely fill niches left vacant by natives” (50). For him, a majority of immigrants who immigrate to global cities are distressed. Their aptitude to sustain “themselves or their families is so limited in their native country that they may perceive emigration as the only solution. To emigrate, they are often prepared to take enormous risks. (Abrahamson 51). Khadija’s father is occasionally physically offensive to his daughter as he penalizes her when she offends his wishes. That disturbance makes him callous in his relations with his family. In other words, he is not a steady flat character, but is attributed a hesitant ambivalent situation vis-à-vis his family. As Khadija says, “[s]ometimes 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).

Khadija’s father behavior is owing to his deep-seated melancholy, his depression and his homesickness to his homeland. Khadija explains: “‘[m]y ache comes from losing my home’, my father tells us a lot” (39), or “[t]hat evening my father started talking about the sand that filled his dreams again. ‘How could you not be a little crazy when you have watched your dreams be buried the way I have?’” (192). Khadija’s father typifies that of a very oriental Arab man. He is very tied to traditions and to conservative ideas of family honor. Indeed, “[Khadija’s father] thinks that his daughter’s reputation is the most important thing in the world” (30), and does not even let her to speak to boys.

Nevertheless, his aggressive manners are often criticized by other members of his family. Laila Halaby wants to prove that this sort of stereotypical traditional patriarchal behavior is not the standard norm in the Arab world and thus, cannot not be accepted. Indeed, there is one instance in the novel where “Esmeralda cursed Khadija’s father in Arabic and said he was an old shoe with a hole in his head as well as one in his ass” (34). Apart from that, the repulsive nature of Khadija’s father conduct is also highlighted in the novel through referring to the significance of fatherhood. He is described not to be a good father because of his disobedience and lack of reverence to his own father: “Baba might be crazy because of all the things he did, especially because he didn’t respect his father properly” (192). He is not only the poorest of the male immigrants in the novel, but also the most religious. His rudeness culminates, while heavily drunk, when in a he attempted to harass both his father and baby son. This incentive event pushed Khadija to call the police though she would be held responsible for doing such daring deed and for shrinking the unity of her family.
II.2. Hala as a Moderate Negotiator Between Two Cultures

The four narrator-characters In *West of the Jordan* are evenly significant in the investigation of gender and diaspora matters in novel. Indeed, through their tangled maternal relations, they all uncover many pertinent features of the diasporic experience in the US. Nevertheless, the character Hala is chiefly fascinating, since she appears the only cousin who is capable of accomplishing a remarkable degree of equilibrium between the two extremes of the hyphen. She is somehow proficient in categorizing herself as a hybrid individual i.e. as both Arab and American at the same time. Yet, it is very important to stress that Hala does not attain an ideal equilibrium between these two cultures, as it is quite unfeasible for a diasporic individuals whose circumstance is inescapably correlated to dislocation and agony.

Hala, a student in Tucson, struggles to make sense of her Arab American identity during her trip back to Jordan for her mother’s funeral, where she confronts her father. He informs her he does not wish her to return back to the United States to proceed her university studies there. Hala’s father, a widower, is strong-minded to instruct all choices about his daughter’s life on his own. Hala declares that, “[w]hile she [Hala’s mother] was alive, my father respected her wishes, but not even two days into my mourning her death, he made it clear that he was going to be the one to make the decisions about my life from then on” (45). His ultimate decision afterward that she obeys him by accepting to continue her studies in Jordan and “put [her] roots here as a woman” (45). Hala delivers the bitter reality when saying, “I was to replace my mother with a husband. I was to stay in Jordan forever. Marry […] Have children. Be someone else’s burden” (45), In other words, this decision imposed upon her was to force her pursue the conventional Arab modes of feminine conduct. Nevertheless, surprisingly, Hala’s father experiences a remarkable shift in his attitudes as the story goes on from a traditional father who is solely preoccupied with his family’s honor at the expense of his daughter’s wishes, to a “new father”, more open-minded, more caring and nurturing, a father that accepts his daughter’s wishes and is proud of her” (Bosch 108).

Toward the end of *West of The Jordan*, in her way back to the United States, Hala symbolically glorifies the significance of her Arab roots, and chooses to put on a roza, a typical Jordanian dress, “while her father has learnt about opening to other cultures and tells her that she should wear jeans” (203). In this respect, Steven Salaita affirms that “[o]ne really interesting thing about *West of the Jordan* is the way nothing, human or geographical, ever descends into a tidy stereotype” (3). This account is chiefly remarkable with respect to the Arab fathers characters that Laila Halaby employs in her novel. In her article “The representation of Fatherhood by The Arab Diaspora in The United States,” Marta Bosch perceives that: [a] wide variety of fathers appear in this novel, making clear the situational position of Arab fatherhood and masculinity” (108). In other words, Arab fathers alternate between “traditionalism and liberalism” (Bosch 108). Khadija’s father for instance, is portrayed as oriented to traditionalism while Soraya’s father is oriented to liberalism. However, “others change their mind throughout their life (as is the case of Hala’s father) making clear that evolution is possible.” (Bosch 108)

*West of the Jordan* is delved into in Amal Talaat Abdelrazek’s book entitled *Contemporary Arab American Women Writers: Hyphenated Identities and Border Crossings* in which she underscores how being in-between cultures shapes the works of Laila Halaby,
Mohja Kahf, Diana Abu-Jaber and Laila Halaby and other Arab American women writers. In her analysis of the character of Hala, she perceives that she (Hala) is “[t]he most developed character” in the novel (153). She maintains that Hala’s break in Jordan and then her going back to America is a very telling experience/journey because she can now “experience her duality not as an alienation and rupture but as an empowering hybridity, seeing the connection and the continuities between the two poles of her identity” (170).

As a matter of fact, hybridity has flourished as a significant dimension of postcolonial cultures in Latin America, Asia, Africa, and the diaspora in the West such as the US. According to Stuart Hall, taking into consideration the fact that identities are created “within, not outside, discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies” (Hall 4). Apart from that, he also highlights the fact that identities appear within “the play of specific modalities of power, and thus are more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion, than they are the sign of an identical, naturally-constituted unity - an ‘identity’ in its traditional meaning” (Hall 4).

Anne D’Alleva, in her book Methods & Theories of Art History, in discussing race, perceives that “Stuart Hall argues that there are two kinds of identity: identity in being (which offers a sense of unity and commonality) and identity as becoming (or a process of identification, which shows the discontinuity in our identity formation)” (D’Alleva 78). According to him, identity is vital, but it is a procedure of “imaginative rediscovery” (D’Alleva 78). Likewise, he opposes the perception of identity as accurate or fundamental, stressing instead “the ways in which cultural identities are subject to the continuous “play” of history, culture, and power” (D’Alleva 78). In West of the Jordan, Hala undergoes a process of advanced hybridization. Indeed, she could be regarded as an example of hybridized subjects given by Hall taking the fact that she smoothly can cope to live with different features of both the Arab and American cultures. Heterogeneity is a focal element when accounting on Hala’s construction of her own identity. Clearly, she is capable to combine a number of different features into her way of life and identity.

II.3. Soraya: An Embodiment of The Rebellious Amoral Arab Female Figure in the West

The third character-narrator cousin, Soraya, could be regarded as the reverse of Khadija’s character. She autonomously lives in Los Angeles, and is an incredibly self-determining girl, frank, and very attentive to her sexuality. Soraya, according to Abdelrazek, is ‘fully aware of her situation as in-between hybrid that does not completely belong in either culture” (147). “Soraya represents the amoral waywardness of the United States and conflicts over individuality and community” (Salaita 80). Her father, an obviously disempowered man, does not seem to have accountability and command over for his family. His only source of power stems essentially from the money he makes in his business. Soraya once declares: “[m]y 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. So men respect him because of his success” (26). Indeed, Soraya’s father could be regarded as emblematic of the metamorphosis in the deep-seated established Arab ideals for immigrants in America. In other words, he represents a great shift from the conventional significance of fatherhood that is omnipresent in the Arab world. Definitely,
instead, he has accomplished the American economic dream of success, yet, he has escaped his fatherhood duties.

Soraya undergoes a process of self-inflicted sense of displacement. Apparently, she is unable to anchor herself in any of her heritages (the Arab one and the American one). She is “fragmented, not only by her desire to follow her own wishes and to express herself in her own way, but also by her Arab heritage that her parents try to impose upon her and against which she rebels” (Abdelrazek 140). She defies her parent’s conventional values and longs for the American sense of self-determination and autonomy. Instead, she takes pleasure in outside the manacles and restrictions imposed on her at home. Soraya undertakes a profound sense of dislocation. She lives in two dissimilar cultures and fails to establish herself as constituent of either one. She smoothly swings “between an Arab world that she looks up to but cannot attain…she continues to lead a double life in which she has no special space for her own” (Abdelrazek 140).

Alix Naff, in her essay “The early Immigrant Experience” perceives that in their enthusiasm to accomplish their dreams in America, “the immigrant generation neglected to preserve their cultural heritage. Much of what that generation knew of their heritage was, in any case, centered on village life and its mythology. About the great-Arab Islamic contributions to world civilization the majority of the immigrants knew little, and refracted through traditional biases” (35). Consequently, second and third generations of Arab Americans showed negligible attention to, or awareness of their ethnic origins. Soraya, for instance, detests obedience and communicates her resentment and insurgence against her mother and her Arab culture through the act of dancing, something that her family often criticizes her for because they only care about what other people will say if they see her dancing. Nicholas Saunders elucidates that the deliriousness created by dancing “can be viewed as a transcendental mind altering experience providing psychic relief to alienated people in a secular, repressive, and materialistic society” (Ecstasy.org). Certainly, Soraya uses dancing to release her discontented aspirations and to flee from her dislocation in a world of cultural clashes where she has to undergo the burden of a binary life. In other words, while attempting to realize her own desires in a land of freedom, Soraya has to obey her parents’ traditions. She often outrages them and quench her desires and needs regardless of what Arab morals (that her mother often reminds her of) state and dictate. In her story “Fire,” she confesses:

This year I told my family a thousand and a one lies and went to 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. 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. Dance, shake it all out—hiz hiz hiz—with eyes closed and hips racing those awful drums.

II.4. Mawal’s stories: As Authentic Depictions of Gendered Patriarchy in the Arab World

Throughout West of The Jordan, Mawal, their Palestinian cousin (I mean Khadija, Soraya and Hala), has never left her homeland Palestine, yet, feels displaced by the pressure of political and mental colonization of her land by the Jewish occupier. Out of thirty seven
stories in the novel, only seven are narrated by Mawal. These stories relate some important sequences in the lives of the character-narrator and other Palestinian women in Palestine. In her first story ‘Nawara’, for instance, she introduces her Palestinian village and its people using a very poetic style highlighting the importance of places in one’s identity. For her, “lots of places have special marks, while other places are just daytime normal with occasional scary night, too thick, silence, or a shrill scream, to jazz them out of dusty boring” (14). The reader get introduced to her village straight forwardly through the detailed descriptions she makes. She even uses direct transliteration to make it easier for non Arabic speakers to understand the context she is describing. She says “our village is called Nawara, which means flowers or blossoms. When you say it, Nawa-vaara-a, a hillside of small white wildflowers comes to mind, or the fragrant new blossoms on an orange or almond tree” (15). She even goes further in introducing the cultural specificities that typify her village: “everywhere is famous for something: political activism, delicious vegetables, ugly women. Our village is an island famous for, beautiful embroidered dresses that we call rozas while most everyone else calls them thobes, and yet surrounded by villages that do not embroider at all” (15). Through the portrayal of the lives of different generations of Palestinian women including, her mother and her grandmother, Mawal creates a mosaic echoing the diversity and the richness of cultural and social history surrounding Palestinian women. Using Abdelrazek’s words Mawal’s stories highlight the socio-political issues that influence Palestinian women’s lives and “capture personal moments that constitute the basic outline of [. . . their] agonizing history” (128).

Mawal’s stories echo features of the gendered patriarchy and the Israeli occupation that monopolize Nawara. She discloses no real sense of safety and belonging to her homeland. She is not even permitted to quit this land, “she has never travelled outside of Nawara, and she knows that she never will until she marries someone who will accompany her confined to this location, Mawal feels displaced and uprooted” (Abdelrazek 127). The stories Mawal relates in her narratives are selected from her memory. She contextualizes salient personal moments that represent and materialize a plain depiction of the unbearable history of palestinian women. Nevertheless, these personal stories also reflect Mawal’s own feelings of anxiety and displacement. These stories portray anguished women enduring diverse sorts of physical, political and social subjugations and confinements.

When scrutinizing Mawal’s stories we comprehend the history of Palestinian women. “It is crucial to recognize 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 diasporai”( Abdelrazek 127). Indeed, Mawal’s sense of dislocation and un-belonging is mainly due to the harsh historical and political condition of women in Palestine. Palestinian women are deprived from their own state and they are allowed a small restricted amount of free will in their own country. The fact that their land is occupied by the Jewish colonizer had made their lives tasteless, controlled, and under perpetual threat. West of The Jordan does not depict an ample portrait of Mawal’s character and subjectivity if we assess it with regard to the three other character-narrators in the story. Yet, she bears an important task as the narrator of the other women’s displacement. Thanks to her detailed description of the setting and the characters, “we understand the politics of location in Nawara with its political upheavals, gender struggles, and social conflicts” (Abdelrazek 127). Mawal’s stories do not only mirror her own state of dislocation and un-belonging but also they are stuffed with “little stories” of Nawara—stories stitched into rozas for which the village is known—stories that will need to be remembred always and that and are unknown to her Palestinian-American cousins” (Abdelrazek 127).
Conclusion

Indeed, for all the female characters in the novel, whether in Palestine or in America, no place is completely itself and no place is completely other. They feel alienated from the place where they belong. They endure personal challenges within their own communities regarding their sexual identities. Simultaneously, they face political and social impediments from the larger American community that exposes them to prejudice and discrimination. Thus, they have no choice but to live in a border zone, in the “third space”. This latter, in-between Arab and American cultures, transgresses labeling, stability, and confinement. Thus, Arab American women live in a fluid space which enables them, to peacefully merge within both cultures.
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