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Hybrid and Hyphenated Arab Women's English Narratives as a New Coming-of Age Literature

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Abstract

Anglophony rose in most Middle Eastern countries from the long years of British colonization as it is the case with other South Asian and South African countries. After Bhabha, this has favored the emergence of hybrid identities, hybrid writings and hybrid cultures. Compared with the literature in French produced by North African (Algerian, Tunisian or Moroccan) or even Lebanese writers, the list of writings produced by Arabs (from Middle East mainly) in English was one on the whole unimpressive. This statement was challenged by an impressive increasing of English productions by Arab writers, mainly and interestingly women like Ahdaf Soueif, Leila Abulela, Soraya Antonius, Fadia Faqir, and others who either live in Britain, in the U.S or between the U.S/Britain and the Arab world. In reality, although scores of books have looked at Anglophone literature around the globe, they tend to make scant reference to the contribution of Arab writers, and specially women. Knowing that names such as Chinua Achebe, Bharati Mukherjee, Salman Rushdie and Anita Desai among others now are forming what can be identified as 'parallel canon', a similar recognition must be dedicated to significant Anglophone Arab writers –most of which are women as Ahdaf Soueif, Fadia Faqir, Diana Abu Djaber and others. This paper raises issues of hybridity, hyphenation and the literary specificity of Arab Anglophone women writings by looking at various bestselling English works produced by Arab British and Arab American women authors.

[**Keywords:** Arab English literature, Arab Anglophone women narratives, Arab British, Arab American, Diaspora, home, minor literature.]

Introduction

The recent impressive boosting of narratives produced in English by women authors who are Arab British/American immigrants or daughters of early Arab British/American immigrants has encouraged many critics and academics to categorize this coming of age literature within specific frameworks. These narratives are now widely recognized by Western critics and are interested in by many academics and researchers¹. Indeed, the last few decades have been marked by an important increase of literary works produced in

¹ It is the case of Dr Lindsey Moore (University of Lancaster), Dr Geoffrey Nash (University of Sunderland), Prof Hoda Elsadda (University of Manchester), Dr Anastasia Valassopoulos (University of Manchester), Dr Dalia Mostafa (University of Manchester), Dr Michelle Obeid (University of Manchester), Wail Hassan (University of Illinois), Dr. Claire Chambers (University of York), Dr Lindsey Moore (University of Lancaster), and others.

English by Arab male and female writers who are described either as *Anglophone* or *hybrid*², needless to mention that Anglophone Arab female writers outnumber male writers. These women writers³, in particular, are of Arabic decent: either academics and/or intellectuals who migrated to Britain or USA and decided to write in English or British / American writers who are daughters of early twentieth century first Arab immigrants settling mainly in the US and whose mother tongue is English. Interestingly, literary works written by Arab Anglophone women writers –mainly novels and short stories –brought more recognition and visibility to the Arab Woman and defy the orientalist representation that was promoted since the nineteenth century in Western literature, media and art as is the case with European paintings and photographs and also in images from the World's Fair in the U.S. in the 19th and early 20th centuries; these paintings depicted the Arab World as an exotic and mysterious place of sand, harems and belly dancers, reflecting a long history of Orientalist fantasies. Examples of these paintings are Delacroix, *Death of Sardanapalus* (1827), Delacroix, *Women of Algiers in their apartment* and others.

Arab women narratives produced by immigrant writers represent a distinct trend that falls into various literary areas, but the most recurrent of these areas in recent literary criticism is Arab Anglophone literature. Certainly, Anglophone Arabic literature, that is a literature conceived and executed in English by writers of Arabic background, is qualitatively different from Arabic literature and Arabic literature translated into English (Nash 11). This trend of Arabic literature is to be considered as the formative influences on contemporary international literatures: the postcolonial, with its theorization of intercultural relations by reference to the impact of colonialism and imperialism on non-Western literatures. The transnational aspect of Anglophone Arabic literature, which may add to this trend the feature of international literature, goes back to the impact and the cutting edge effects of globalization.

It is, therefore, in this sense that narratives produced by this category of Arab women writers have often been classified under the few labels of postcolonial, feminist, non-native, hybrid or Anglophone literary discourse. It is assumed that compared with the literature in French produced by North African writers (Algerian, Tunisian or

² Coined by Homi Bhabha in the 1990s, cultural hybridity and hybridization are concepts widely used in anthropological and cultural studies circles to stand for the process by which cultures around the world adopt a certain degree of homogenized global culture while clinging to aspects of their own traditional culture. The result is a mixture, or hybrid. Hyphenation is also a term used to describe the process whereby young generations of immigrants give birth to ethnic minorities whose hyphen join two sides of their identities as is the case of Arab Americans second and third generations.

³ There are several names of female authors who are either Arab British - Ahdaf Soueif, Fadia Faqir, Layla Elalami, Betoul Elkhedir, Leila Aboulela and others –or Arab American –Mohja Kahf, Diana Abujaber, Layla Elmaleh, Naomi Shehab Nye and others –and who have gained a literary recognition for their works which created certain cultural and literary bridges between divergent spaces, cultures and peoples as is the case for Soueif's prominent novel, *The Map of Love*.

Moroccan) or even Lebanese writers, the list of writings produced by Arabs (from Middle East mainly) in English was one on the whole unimpressive; this statement was challenged by an impressive increasing of English productions by Arab writers, mainly and interestingly women such as Ahdaf Soueif, Leila Aboulela, Soraya Antonius, Fadia Faqir, and others. Thus, there has been recently a significant growing interest in these works manifesting in the rising courses devoted to Arab Anglophone writings in many western universities and in the many books written⁴ to record and analyze these works and also in the many conferences and forums of which the thematic is related to the particularity of this discourse⁵.

However, what has often been problematic is which literary framework best fits these narratives and how to categorize this hybrid/blended trend of English and Arabic literature. Attempting to answer these questions, a primary issue in our research paper is to give a more specific categorization to Arab Anglophone women narratives while taking into consideration that these writings are widely divergent because of the political, cultural and religious non-homogeneity of the Arab world itself, yet we believe that a common commitment to their *Arab-ness* and cultural identity must be shared among most –if not all –Arab Anglophone women writers whether they are Arab Americans, Arab British or *Anglicized* Arab female intellectuals. In the following sections, we will present our argumentation that these narratives are more likely to be considered as minor literature through a set of examples of novels and works produced by the most read Arab Anglophone women writers.

1. Arab women narratives in English: the articulation of a minor literature

According to Wail Hassan (2011), because works produced by Arab women living in the Diaspora are referred to as immigrant writings, building on Deleuze and Guattari's theory of minor literature (1986) is one way of relocating these narratives. To refer to minor literature theory is to stress the handling of a given language by a writer who is not native of this language.

Deleuze and Guattari's theory simply traces the figure of immigrants who stand between the culture of origin and that of the *adoptive* country; and equipped with first-hand knowledge of both, they assume the role of mediators, interpreters, cultural translators or a double-sight observer of the two cultural entities. This is very much true to most Arab Anglophone (British or American) women authors –Ahdaf Soueif, Fadia

⁴ An example is the one-day interdisciplinary workshop on the works of Arab women writers in diaspora held on December 10th, 2009 under the title of "Arab Women Writers in Diaspora: Horizons of Dialogue" and which was organized by dr. Youcef Awad, a currently senior lecturer in Amman University, Jordan.

⁵ See Yousef Awad (2011), *The Arab Atlantic: Resistance, Diaspora, and Trans-cultural Dialogue in the Works of Arab British and Arab American Women Writers*. Lambert Publishing.

Faqir, Laila Lalami and Leila Aboulela and others as British Arabs; Naomi Shehab Nye, Layla Halabi, Susan Muaddi Darradj and Diana Abou Jaber and others as Arab Americans –though divergences must exist.

For Deleuze and Guattari, a minor has three main characteristics: The deterritorialization of language, the connection of the individual to a political immediacy, the collective assemblage of enunciation. Based on this perspective, we argue that Arab Anglophone writings, women writings in particular, may be categorized as minor and/or minority literature. Although contemporary Arab women writings are divergent as their authors belong to different communities, we believe that dealing with literary texts produced by hybrid and hyphenated Arab Anglophone women authors must submit to a finite convergence that bring the difference of these works to a common commitment vis-à-vis the nation, the home, the culture, the religion and above all the gender.

In this context, the localisation of Arab Anglophone women writings into the area of minor literature is based on the use of English not as a universal language but as a linguistic means to surpass the boundaries between the Arab writer and the Western reader or as a deliberate choice for writers whose mother tongue is American English or British English. English, be it the major language, in the hands of these writers –Faqir, Soueif, Halabi, Kahf, Aboulela, Nye and all Arab and/or Muslim Anglophone –has been deterritorialized and metamorphosed to meet the cultural specificity of Arab women as writers who traverse worlds, cultures and languages. Therefore, the specificity of works produced in English by Arab American or Arab British (women) writers are widely divergent from works produced by main stream American or British writers in essence and in genre. The fine line that makes this difference is the cultural aspect that metamorphoses the English utilized in these narratives.

2. Arab Anglophone women narratives as hybrid and/or hyphenated literature

Novels, short stories, poems and even plays produced in English by writers of Arabic origins contribute to the emergence of an independent literature that is neither Arabic nor English, but it is linguistically and culturally hybrid, discursively multidimensional and literarily heterogeneous. Besides, it is important to highlight the divergences –and convergences –among works produced by Arab British women writers who may be best described as hybrid and those produced by Arab American women writers who are daughters of late nineteenth century immigrants and who may be best described as hyphenated.

In this connection, Yousuf Awad, from Jordan, has submitted a whole PhD thesis, entitled *Cartographies of Identities: Resistance, Diaspora, and Trans-cultural Dialogue in the Works of Arab British and Arab American Women Writers*⁶, in which he aimed at

⁶ Acculturation is a process in which members of one cultural group adopt the beliefs and behaviors of another group; it also refers to assimilation, and assimilation of one cultural group into another may be evidenced by changes in language preference, adoption of common attitudes and values, membership in common social groups and institutions, and loss of separate political or ethnic identification.

exploring the controversy that stems out of the differences existing between Arab British and Arab American women writers. He argues that there is a tendency among Arab British women novelists to foreground and advocate trans-cultural dialogue and cross-ethnic identification strategies in a more pronounced approach than their Arab American counterparts who tend, in turn, to employ literary strategies to resist stereotypes and misconceptions about Arab communities in American popular culture. He also argues that these differences result from two diverse racialized Arab immigration and settlement patterns on both sides of the Atlantic.

Amal Talaat Abdelrazek has published a significant book entitled *Contemporary Arab American Women Writers: hyphenated identities and border crossings* a work that brings a lot to the reader's apprehension of what a hyphenated identity of an Arab American woman is. This work adds an important clarification vis-à-vis the significance of the concept 'hyphenated identity' used to refer to Arab American writers and 'hybrid identity' to refer rather to Arab British writers within the context of our research. Thus, straight to the point we deduce that a conceptual distinction must be given to different groups belonging to the major trend of Anglophone Arab writers: *hyphenated* to Arab American writers, and *hybrid* to Arab British writers. This distinction is highlighted in the way each group would represent their identity through writings differently and/or similarly, and then it brings a crucial dimension for the categorization of Anglophone Arab women narratives belonging to these two subgroups. We argue that the different identities strongly influence mainly the thematic of the writings of Anglophone Arab women writers, their conception of their 'home' /'home-country', and the Diasporic experience which might be different from one writer to another. We believe that individual background of each writer and her literary tendencies also influence the perception of *home*.

Moreover, it is the precarious –yet different –position Arabs occupy in ethnic and racial discourses in Britain and the US that Arab Anglophone women writers living in Britain and in the US perceive and re-identify differently their *home* and *home-country*, hence their *identity* differently and distinctively. The vision of home specific to these diasporic writers is rooted in the specificity of their hybrid and/or hyphenated identity. As women, as fiction writers and as Arabs, Ahdaf Soeuf, Fadia Faqir, Leila Aboulela, Diana Abou Jaber, Naomi Shehab Nye, and others, found a space in their narratives to explore their own depiction of the *home* they either left behind at a later stage of their lives (for the first three writers) or they originally come from and nostalgically yet permanently go back to at a later stage of their lives (as in the case of Arab Americans).

3. The Distinct perception of *home* in Arab Anglophone women narratives

Through the various works of literature –whether poetry, novels, short stories and even drama –produced by Arab Anglophone women, we read diverse perceptions of *home* as being identified differently by Arab women writers, but who write in English. Because the

word 'home' immediately recalls the idea of the private sphere of patriarchal hierarchy, gendered self-identity, shelter and comfort, the perception of home in the writings of Arab Anglophone women writers relies on their conceptualization of their *home* – homeland, home-country or the nation and the place they are supposed to (originally) belong to – is twofold as it moves along two main axes:

- The axe of the home they have willingly or unwillingly been displaced from, and then seek to change and see differently;
- And the axe of the home to which they are supposed to originally belong to, and then imaginarily represent with nostalgia.

In this respect, we need to stress that the heterogeneity of the literature produced by Arab women writers in Diaspora rises from the different politics of location specific to two distinct ethnic communities – Arab British and Arab American – as Arab immigration and settlement patterns in Britain and the US are quite historically divergent. As a matter of fact, the literature produced by Arab British writers must be of a different cultural expression than that produced by contemporary Arab American writers. In the words of Layla Almaleh, Arab British literature as mostly female, feminist, diasporic in awareness, and political in character (Almalah 13) while Steven Salaita (2007) argues, discussing Arab American literature, that Anglophone Arabs are no less Arabs than anybody else – they merely carry different cultural values as a result of their different social circumstances.

To focus on Arab British women writers, we intend thereby to deal with particular narratives produced by Arab authors who live in Britain (or between Britain and the Arab world) or who are of a mixed Arab and British marriage. Whereas, by focusing on Arab American women authors, we purposefully mean to deal with American born citizens who are of Arab origins. The two groups of writers represent two different minority groups, but with a convergent *home* – the Middle East – and common cultural identity, be it that of Arab origins.

Behind this classification lies an assertion that Anglophone Arab women writers hold a specific view of their *home*, the adoptive culture, their cultural identity and how to bring closer the two cultures; yet this view depends on their politics of location. For instance, in Faqir's *My Name is Salma*, the story is set between the Middle East and Britain. It investigates immigration to a Western country – Britain – not only as a new theme in terms of the central character Salma who is an unskilled Bedouin woman, but also in terms of raising questions about the future of Arabs who live in Britain. Salma is cut off from her country of origin and arrives in Britain for a permanent stay; as such, the novel portrays conflicts of forced dislocation, integration, assimilation, racism and the settlement experience. Salma is constantly dislocated to a new place, that is a new home, but it was for a permanent stay in England, a completely different country that seems to be different in culture and religion.

It is in Exeter, in a new home (-land), that Salma goes through a process of forming a new identity, with a new name 'Sally Asher' and a new language with which she fuses Arabic, while she is still haunted by past experiences echoing from Hima, her home-

village. Undertaking a brutal process of acculturation⁷, Salma's identity is changeable to the point of fragmentation "A few years ago, I had tasted my first fish and chips, but my mountainous Arab stomach could not digest the fat [...] Salma resisted, but Sally must adapt". (Faqr 9) These lines quoted from the first chapter of the novel sum up a long process of deterritorialization, dislocation, acculturation and assimilation the Bedouin Arab woman victim Salma goes through.

On the other side of the Atlantic, we see Arab American women writers tending to employ literary strategies to subvert stereotypes commonly associated with Arabs in the US. They also tend to look closely at the Arab community from within in order to explore some of the problems that Arab Americans encounter. The re-representation of Arab communities as an important minority in the American society is central to the works produced by Arab American authors.

For instance, The Arab American novelist Diana Abu Jaber has dealt with conflicting messages about her Arab identity. Abu Jaber writes about Arab American life, and about characters who are from Iraq and Jordan as is the case with *Crescent* (2003) that is set in Los Angeles and features two major characters with Iraqi root. The major characters in "Crescent" include Hanif Al Eyad. He's an erudite Iraqi professor in Los Angeles, educated at Georgetown, who is religiously lapsed but still considers himself a devout Muslim and is endowed with good looks and sex appeal. Al Eyad was forced to flee from Saddam Hussein's reign, but his life on the run is only a small backdrop to the first half of the story as his dislocation and malaise will continue in the Diaspora when being deterritorialized. However, Nadia's restaurant, where the other protagonist Sirine who is Arab American with Iraqi roots, is the place where a lot of minorities and ethnic groups gather to reterritorialize their lost cultural traits, particularly through food, and it is their where Han may be reterritorialized and re-integrated too.

Crescent (2003) engages with a problem that faces Arab American communities, namely, stereotyping. *Crescent* explores the life of the intellectual in Diaspora. Among other themes, it attempts to give an insight into the daily issues that an exile encounters. Abu Jaber throws light on the problems of displacement, exile and Diaspora in the present global scene. Lorraine Mercer and Linda Strom, for instance, argue that 'food functions as a complex language for communicating love, memory and exile' in *Crescent*⁸. The two protagonists of the novel, the Iraqi American Sirine and the Iraqi exiled lecturer Han represent two different experiences of displacement: cultural exile vs. political exile.

⁷ Lorraine Mercer and Linda Strom, 'Counter Narratives: Cooking Up Stories of Love and Loss in Naomi Shihab Nye's Poetry and Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent*', *MELUS*, 32 (2007), 33-46 (p. 33).

⁸ S. Salaita, 35.

Conclusion(s)

Contemporary Arab women writers' works surpass the feature of post-coloniality attributed to them by most critics. They, interestingly, foreground in post-colonial, post-postcolonial, feminist, transnational, transcultural and cultural studies. This multiplicity of the nature of these narratives lies in the particularity of these writers; they "...are no less Arabs than anybody else –they merely carry different cultural values as a result of their different social circumstances."⁹ Moreover, these women writers not only write in a universal language, be it English – in the sense that most of them are women of two worlds: the mother country and the Diaspora –but they also may find more liberty in dealing with controversial issues and taboo themes when writing in English; these characteristics make their English writings more likely to give a vivid, authentic representation of the Arab world with its cultural, religious and political specificity, and to succeed to construct cross-cultural bridges between the West and the Arab world.

In fact, what is special to these works is the fact that they are written by women who, in different ways, are being feeling displaced and at the very contact zone of many cultures at the same time. As a matter of fact, we argue that this characteristic brings an important element of distinctiveness and individuality to English Arab women writings. We believe that, through their writings, Arab Anglophone writers, hyphenated or hybrid, defy any categorization and speak articulately to the diversity of Arab women wherever they are –to their ideas, desires, emotions and strategies for survival.

Arab women Anglophone literature is produced by women writers who are generally well-acquainted with standard Arabic, and they have other reasons for writing in English, like having grown up in areas or having studies in institutions dominated by English, or simply having migrated to English speaking countries such as the Egyptian Ahdaf Soueif, the Palestinian Soraya Antonius, the Sudanese Leila Abulela or the Jordanian Fadia Faqir.

The self-identification of this group of writers –Arab British and/or Arab American –their gender, their ability to manipulate different cultural traits and amalgamate them in one, and for some the linguistic bilingual capacity, have given rise to specific literary writings with special thematic, special characters, special literary techniques, and special doubled perception of a contemporary life that almost all fall into the deterritorialization vs. reterritorialization of immigrants who feel displaced and dislocated in the Diaspora. Therefore, it's high time literary critics thought of Arab Anglophone women narratives as a new minor literature that is articulated in a major language –English –and international discourse particular to Arab Anglophone women writers in order to set out new literary

⁹ In an article entitled *Women's Narrative in Modern Arabic Literature* published on NITTLE Arab World Project website, Sabry Hafez, the author of *The Genesis of Arabic Narrative Discourse*, brought about a significant gender-based typology of Arab women's literary writings; this typology offers a triadic typology of the development of feminist awareness in the Arab world and posits a homological relationship between this typology, the changes in class background of the writers and their perception of national identity. Ref. http://acc.teachmideast.org/texts.php?module_id=7&reading_id=370

elements that can add more aspects to Sabry Hafez's *feminist literary typology* [10], notably the Arab Anglophone women writings' discursive and genre typology.

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