The Polyphonic, Dialogic Feminine, Narrative Voice in Anglophone Arab Women's Writings

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Abstract
The present paper aims to distinguish the narrative voice in Anglophone Arab women narratives from other feminine voices by putting spotlight on the state of hybridity, hyphenation and oscillation between home and Diaspora and how Arab women writers living in the diaspora stand in a particular cultural, social, political and linguistic position that enables them to voice distinctively their female compatriots to the Western readership. A fundamental preoccupation, in this article, is to argue that the narrative voice in Anglophone Arab women's writings is both dialogic and polyphonic following Bakhtin's theory of Dialogism. The major finding of this paper is that the voice in these narratives is both multiple and complex since the hyphenated identity of Arab women writers living in the Diaspora is also complex and multi-layered.

Keywords: Voice, Dialogism, Polyphony, Diaspora, Hyphenation, Hybridity.

Introduction

Voice and voicing are two fundamental concepts critics explore the most when dealing with women's narratives. The two terms cover disciplinary and theoretical differences by appearing in many disciplines that converge with feminist and women studies: history, philosophy, sociology, literature and psychology. For half a century or so, many titles of books have reflected the increasing interest in how women voice their silenced bodies and liminal identities; many of these titles announce "another voice", or "a different voice" and resurrect the "lost voices" of women poets and pioneering fictional figures – ancient and modern. To this end, actual women – famous and obscure – are honoured for speaking up and out.

If a focus has recently been on the voicing of silent feminine voices, we should acknowledge the many important attempts to voice other silenced communities – people of colour, people struggling or having struggled against colonial rule, and religious and sexual minorities. These marginalized minority groups have also written and spoken about the urgency of "coming to voice" (Lanser 1992). It is within these theoretical and thematic frameworks that postcolonial writings, *Borderlands* writings, *diasporic* narratives and *immigrants/ hybrid* writings have burgeoned, and it is at the very meeting point of all these lines that we have to re-locate Arab Anglophone women narratives, and it is in this same line that I will explore in this paper the concept of voicing in various selected literary texts basing on a feminist poetics of these narratives.

This paper aims to distinguish the narrative voice in Anglophone Arab women narratives from other feminine voices in the sense that Arab women writers living in the diaspora stand in a particular cultural, social, political and linguistic position that enables them to voice distinctively their female compatriots to the Western readership. Though it is a marginal position,[1] this peripheral location grants these writers a distinct perception of the socio-political, cultural and religious situation both in their home-countries and host-countries. Referring to the Lost Generation,[2] we may see better when we are at the margin. Therefore, voicing the reality and expressing authentically the living conditions in the two spaces – homeland and host country – while rooming a third, in-between space becomes specific and peculiar to this category. In what follows, a theoretical explication of the voice as a key concept in the humanities and in women/feminist studies, in particular, is to be presented.

1. Narrative voice: the writer's authority vs. the character's fictional consciousness

It has long been recognized in literary studies that stories, novels and narratives are narrated from different points of view ranging from the godlike 'omniscient narrator' whose position is outside the story, to the unreliable narrator who is a character acting within a given story. Hence, it is assumed that the selection of a narrative voice in which to tell a story is one of the most important stylistic choices to be made by authors since it affects in a quite crucial way the attitude of the reader to the events related in the story. A reader might be more inclined to 'believe' an omniscient narrator while he or she would expect a distortion of events in a story told by an unreliable narrator. In the British Jordanian Fadia Faqir's *My Name is Salma* (2007), for instance, the 'I' – first person narrator – which represents Salma's voice – is untrustworthy in many occasions since the reader knows that the protagonist Salma goes through a psychological disorder due to the cruel events she experienced. We may hear, in the first two pages, the 'I' voice of Salma who stands between her past and present, and then we are suspicious about the many images she recalls from her past. She says: "A few years ago, I tasted my first fish and chips, but my mountainous Arab stomach could not digest the fat, which floated in my tummy for days. Salma resisted, but Sally must adapt" (Faqir 9). The reader, here, may or may not grasp how Salma remembers the first fish and chips she tasted in England.

Also, in the Aberdeen-resident and Sudanese-born Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* (2005), the protagonist Najwa's 'I' voice is disrupted by the dreariness of her past: the death of her parents, being exiled to England, being betrayed by her lover in many places in the story which makes the reader mistrustful vis-à-vis the many events brought to her mind continuously all through the

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[1] Because they are immigrants, hyphenated/hybrid, bi-cultural, bi-lingual and – above all – women, Arab Anglophone women authors find themselves marginalized in different ways and because of many reasons. In the host country, their arab-ness is a first reason for which these authors may find themselves marginalized from the mainstream literary community. Back home, it is their hyphenation or hybridization – linguistic and cultural – that may exclude them from the national literary community.

[2] Used for the first time by Gertrude Stein, the label of The Lost Generation refers to that group of men and women who came of age during World War I and who felt disillusioned in this unfamiliar post-war world. The Lost Generation was a group of American writers, most of whom emigrated to Europe and worked there from the end of World War I until the Great Depression. Because they were displaced to Europe, writers –Hemingway, Stein, Fitzgerald and others – could perceive from their marginal position what was wrong with their American nation.

story. Najwa says on the first page of the novel: "I've come down in the world. I've slid to a place where the ceiling is low . . . Most of the time I'm good. I accept my sentence and do not brood or look back. But sometimes a shift makes me remember" (Aboulela 1). It is because of this shift that the following events may or may not be fully believed.

There is a consensus among many literary critics (Bakhtin and Simpson, to name only few) that the voice of a literary work involves attitudes. In any given selection of a fictional work, we have a narrator and an author. Each has a perspective, a way of viewing the subject, people or events involved. Voice can be defined in many ways, but the first step in determining narrative voice is to decide what point of view is being used. In other words, who is telling the story, how that person relates to the action of the plot (the succession of events) and how much he or she knows about what is going on in the story and in the minds of the characters. To this end, we identify two locations and two worlds:
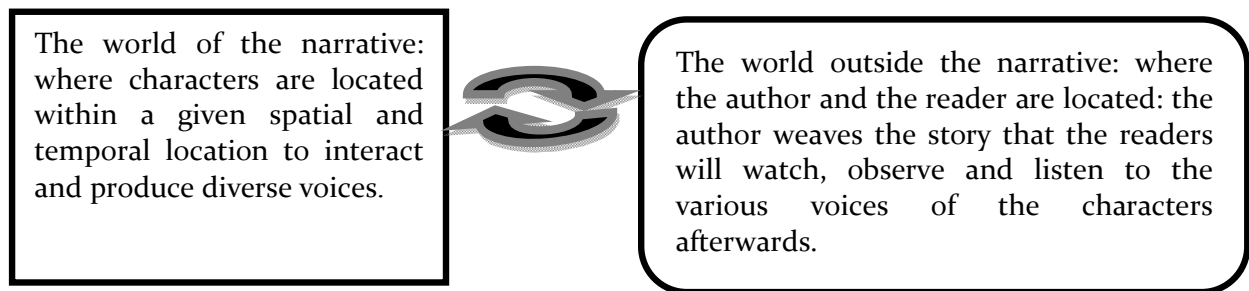
The world of the narrative: where characters are located within a given spatial and temporal location to interact and produce diverse voices.		The world outside the narrative: where the author and the reader are located: the author weaves the story that the readers will watch, observe and listen to the various voices of the characters afterwards.

Figure 1: The two worlds inside and outside a narrative

The figure above displays that place, time, characters and events of a story all exist within the world of the narrative while the reader watches and listens to the many voices of the characters. In this regard, Sven Birkert says: "The writer writes and the reader reads – or so it appears – and the matter rests, for most. But in truth, this simple proposition is a mask for a vast system of ambiguities and entanglements" (34).

The narrator, therefore, stands between the reader and the story; his or her aim is to tell the reader a story, to describe the characters and events as they are happening within the confines of the world of the narrative. The narrator's voice is dominant over other characters' voices. In a third person narration, there is a limited point of view that is also omniscient. The narrator tells the story using third person pronouns and is able to transmit to the reader the thoughts, opinions and inner consciousness of only one of the characters in the story – someone who is often the protagonist. Sometimes, the omniscient narrator reveals the thoughts of the protagonist through a stream of consciousness, i.e. the flow of thoughts as they occur in people's mind. In *My Name is Salma*, Salma is in a closed circle of stream of consciousness which draws her back and forth from past to present and vice versa. She jumps from one idea to another though an omniscient narrator – we believe it is the author herself –tries to arrange these thoughts in a more rational way so that the reader may grasp the agonies Salma is experiencing:

My petals were plucked out one by one. She [Salma's mother] yanked, bit, belted until I turned black and blue and sank blissfully into darkness. Walking alone under electric poles, whose shadows were getting longer and longer, I hugged my shopping bag. No it was not easy living here in England as an 'alien', which was how the immigration officer had described me. (Faqir 34)

In the above extract as well as in many parts of *My Name is Salma*, we spot the extensive use of internal/interior monologue; the main aim of this technique is to report the protagonist's

thoughts as they are experienced by him or her; this may attribute to a fictional work a more realist aspect, and to the protagonist a more authentic representation of a given individual.

Referring to the narrative mode in modern and postmodern works of fiction, it must be noted that the internal monologue technique used in the selected works is related to another technique of narration and plot structuring that is the stream of consciousness. Apparently, the two techniques may overlap, however while in the stream of consciousness mode there is a sort of experimental technique in which the narrator disappears and thoughts are represented in their free flow – grammar rules are not respected and punctuation is not used and this often makes the text incomprehensible – in an interior monologue, narration can be integrated into a *third-person* narrative. The viewpoints and the character's thoughts are woven into authorial description, using their own language as characters, and Arab authors writing in English are a perfect exemplification of this literary phenomenon when they weave their Arabic with the characters' English as in the following extract from Faqir's *My Name is Salma*:

> 'A few years later I began putting on weight. I developed a tummy first then fat gathered all over my body. I also began losing my hair, the sheen in my eyes, the lightness of my step'
>
> 'What was it? *Sin il ya's*[3]: the age of despain?'
>
> 'The doctor said yes it is *sin il ya's*: the menopause.'

In fact, it is admitted that the term "stream of consciousness" is very similar to interior monologue – and used interchangeably by some – but this refers more specifically to a *first person* narrative which mimics the mishmash of thoughts, emotions and memories passing through a given character's mind. Nevertheless, the interior monologue narrative mode is not necessarily written in first person. Furthermore, stream of consciousness tends to be less ordered than interior monologue in the sense that consciousness has no beginning and no end – thoughts flit quite randomly from one thing to another as is the case with William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*.[4] As a matter of fact, stream of consciousness may be considered an extreme form of interior monologue.

Relying on the distinction between stream of consciousness and interior/internal monologue given above, one may claim that the narrative mode that is extensively and deliberately used in most of Arab Anglophone women narratives is rather the interior monologue technique. Just as much as Virginia Woolf was interested in giving voice to the complex inner world of feeling and memory and conceived the human personality as a continuous shift of impressions and emotions, Arab women writers of the Diaspora tend to voice a similar consciousness by using the interior monologue to make the displaced feminine voice widely heard. In Arab Anglophone narratives, the events that traditionally made up a story are no longer important. What matters, in our opinion, is the impression these events make on the female characters who experience them through journeys of displacement and forced migration. In many

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[3] It is the Arabic word for menopause for which the author uses a word-to-word translation 'the Age of despair' instead of a medical terminology.

[4] *The Sound and the Fury* is a novel written by the American modernist writer William Faulkner. The novel is well-known for its special narrative style that relies on the stream of consciousness, a technique pioneered by 20th-century European novelists such as James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. Besides the novel's uniqueness in embodying a disabled character's thoughts (Benjy's), Faulkner has been praised for his ability to recreate the thought process of the human mind.

works written by Anglophone Arab authors, the omniscient narrator disappears and the point of view shifts inside the characters' minds through flashbacks, associations of ideas, fleeting impressions presented as a continuous flux. For instance, in Faqir's *My Name is Salma*, we can only hear the inner voice of Salma recalling past events from her life in Hima. In the British Egyptian author Ahdaf Soueif's novel *In the Eye of the Sun* (1992) the story of Asya, the protagonist, is told through an anachronic order; the first chapter is set in "July-August 1979," then the second chapter "May-June 1967," and a third "October 1967-May 1968"; in fact, the novel's succeeding chapters are flashbacks. In this novel, Soueif has invested scenes of Asya's childhood with the sparkly radiance of fond memory. Similarly, in the author's short story *Sandpiper*, the unknown female narrator is in constant interior monologue with herself and with the surrounding natural landscape. Also in *The Map of Love* (1999), the story begins in the 1990s with three twentieth century characters: Amal, Omar and Isabel; then we are dragged to another space and time in the nineteenth century with other characters: Anna, Sharif and Layla. In the story, the shift from past to present and present to past is constant. The narrative is spiral rather than linear. Then, we hear two simultaneous voices: Amal's and Anna's. It is only with the italisation of Anna's words that the reader can distinguish the two voices as in: "I got to know Anna as though she was my best friend . . . *If I could believe that he died for a noble cause –*" (Soueif 44)

In Aboulela's *Minaret*, Najwa's thoughts are revealed to the reader by the protagonist herself when she tells us about her reflection of her body in the mirror when she goes to the new house of Lamia to work as a baby-sitter for her daughter Mai; she says:

> There's a mirror in the lobby. It shows a woman in a white headscarf and beige, shapeless coat. Eyes too bright and lashes too long, but still I look homely and reliable, the right age. A young nanny might be careless, and older nanny complains about her back. I am the right age. (Aboulela, 3)

To explain the use of internal monologue technique by most modernist and postmodernist writers, in her essay *Modern Fiction* (1919), Woolf explains that it is a technique that simply verbalizes thoughts. She says:

> Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad of impressions – trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday, the accent falls differently from of old; the moment of importance came to here but there; so that, if a writer were a free man and not a slave, if he could write what he chose, not what he must, if he could base his work upon his own feeling and not upon convention, there would be no plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love interest or catastrophe in the accepted style, and perhaps not a single button sewn on as the Bond Street sailors would have it. Life is not a series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning to the end (Woolf, NP)

In the different texts of Anglophone Arab women writers that we have selected to analyse, the narrators are women and their voices seem to be disrupted and swinging between the past and the present. The internal monologue, as mentioned above, is extensively used, so the feminine voices of the female protagonists in these works are highly identified. In Faqir's *My Name is Salma*, Salma's voice, though reluctant, is louder than her oppressor –the Patriarch. In Aboulela's *Minaret*, Najwa's voice, though defeated, is louder than her defeater –being exiled. Similarly, Khadra's voice, though unstable, is louder than her destabilize –religious extremism. The reader, therefore, can hear the voice of the female characters when they voice their inner

thoughts. In what follows, a focus is given to the feminist poetics of narrative voices as being theorized by Gérard Genette, Susan Lanser and other critics.

2. A Feminist Poetics of Narrative Voice

Voice has often been recognized as a humanist fiction, for both the collectively and personally mute. However, the term has become not only a sign of identity and power, but also a sign of self-recognition. Luce Irigaray suggests that to find a voice/voix is to find a way/voie. In narrative poetics (narratology) voice is an equally crucial – though more circumscribed – term, designating tellers as distinct from both authors and non-narrating characters of narrative. Although many critics acknowledged the bad inaccuracy of "*voice*" and "*teller*" to mean something written, these two terms persist even among structuralists. According to Gérard Genette, "*in the most unobtrusive narrative, someone is telling me a story, is inviting me to listen to it as he tells it*" (101).

According to the previous explanation of voice, and to the *Routeldge Encyclopedia of Narrative* (36), voice is also defined as an umbrella term for the field of questions relating to the speech acts of the "narration situation to narratorial idiom."[5] According to Genette (1980) the term 'voice' was introduced in narratology essentially to answer questions like "who speaks?" in a narrative text, as opposed to the other two questions of "who sees?" and "whose perspective orients the text?" Genette answers the question of "who speaks?" with a typology of narrators – auto-, extra-, hetero-, homo-, intra-diegetic narrator –and further extends the discussion of voice to the question of where the narrator speaks from –this what we call *narrative level* – and when the narrator speaks that is the time of the narration.

However, Susan Lanser believes that Genette's distinction is not essential but rather conventional. For Lanser, narratives have narrators because Western tradition has continued to construct reading and listening in *speakerly* terms. The convention may already be disappearing in an age of mechanical reproduction, bureaucratic discourse, and *computer-generated* texts (electronic texts). For an opposing viewpoint, narration entails social relationships and thus involves much more than the technical imperatives for getting a story told. It is from this perspective that we are going to decipher the narrative codes in the selected works, and we recall that three are novels while one is a collection of short stories and the last is a collection of poems. Although narration seems to be more specific to novels than to short stories or poems, we believe that as long as a story is told, a theme is *fictionalized* and a narrative voice is heard.

Lanser adopts a similar perspective and argues that narrative voice and the narrated world are mutually constitutive: if there is no tale without a teller, there is no teller without a tale. This inter-dependence gives the narrator a liminal position that is at once conditional and privileged; the narrator has no experience "outside" the text yet it brings the text into experience (Lanser, 4). However, our focus in this article where the fundamental aim is to dive into the narrative voice in the works of fiction that are produced by Arab Anglophone women authors is not going to be only on the narrator, but it is also our very intention to explore how this polyphonic narrative represents many issues related to the MENA (Middle East and North African) region and women in this area.

Dealing with women narratives, as literary critics we adhere to the idea that narration entails social relationships and thus involves more than the technical imperatives for getting a

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[5] see Herman D., Jahn M. and Ryan M.L. eds. *Routeldge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*. Routledge. 2005. Print

story told, and told from a feminine standpoint. The narrative voice and the narrated world are mutually constitutive as we have already argued above. This interdependence gives the narration a liminal position that is at once contingent and privileged. The narrator has no experience outside the text yet brings the text into experience. Thus, narrative speech acts cannot be said to be mere "imitations" (Lanser 7) like the acts of characters because they are the acts that make the "imitations" possible (Lanser7).

As a matter of fact, willingly or unwillingly while seeking to find the narrative/narrator we also seek to hear a particular voice – or particular voices. However, despite the feminist-narratological shared recognition of the power of voice, the two have entailed separate inquiries of antithetical tendency: one is general mimetic and political (the feminist) and the other is specific, semiotic and technical (the narratological). Our perspective, therefore, is to bring closer the two areas. In point of fact, when feminists talk about *voice*, they usually refer to the behavior of actual or fictional persons and groups who assert woman-centered points of view. Thus, feminists may speak of a literary character *who* refuses patriarchal pressures as finding a "voice" whether or not that voice is represented textually.

On the other hand, when narrative theorists talk about voice, we are usually concerned with formal structures and not with the causes, ideologies, or social implications of particular narrative practices (Lanser 8). In opposition, with a few exceptions, feminist criticism does not ordinarily consider the technical aspects of narration, and narrative poetics does not ordinarily consider the social properties and political implications of narrative voice. In this sense, *formalist poetics may seem to feminists naively empiricist, hiding ideology as objective truth, sacrificing significance for precision, incapable of producing distinctions that are politically meaningful[6]*; may be more relevant when dealing with postcolonial women narratives.

Approached from another angle, as a narratological term, "voice" attends to the specific forms of textual practice and avoids the essentializing tendencies of its more casual feminist usages. On the other hand, as a political term "voice" saves the textual study from a formalist isolation (Lanser 8) that often treats literary events as if they were inconsequential to human history. Thus, when these two approaches to "voice" converge in what Mikhail Bakhtin has called a *sociological poetics*[7], it becomes possible to see narrative technique not as a product of ideology but as ideology itself. We argue, thereby, that narrative voice has situated itself at the juncture of both social position and literary practice whence comes our argumentation on the narrative voice of Arab Anglophone women writings.

Bakhtin's Polyphony and Dialogism

In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin developed many concepts which are related to the main concern of this paper, particularly 'polyphony' (borrowed from music) – a key concept when dealing with Anglophone Arab narratives. Polyphony literally means multiple voices. To make a reference to Bakhtin is basically to focus on how he read Dostoevsky's work as texts containing many different voices, unmerged into a single perspective, and not subordinated to the voice of the author. Each of these voices has its own perception, its own validity, and its own narrative

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[6] Kelly TRUMBLE. "HER BODY IS HER OWN": VICTORIAN FEMINISTS, SEXUAL VIOLENCE, AND POLITICAL SUBJECTIVITY. A published PhD. Florida State University. 2004.Web.

[7] This concept was described in P.N. Medvedev and M.M. Bakhtin *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship: A Critical Introduction to Sociological Poetics,* 1978.

weight within the novel. From this standpoint, we identify the literary voice in most Anglophone Arab women narratives as being polyphonic as it will be argued later in this section.

According to Bakthin, authors do not place their own narrative voice between the character and the reader, but rather, allow characters to shock and subvert. It is as if the books were written by multiple characters, and not from a single author's standpoint. Instead of a single objective world, held together by the author's voice, there is a plurality of consciousnesses, each with its own world. The reader does not see a single reality presented by the author, but rather, how reality appears to each character. For instance, in Faqir's *My Name is Salma*, the reader may get confused between two voices that echo the protagonist's sub-consciousness; sometimes it is Salma, the Bedouin oppressed woman who is heard, while at other times and in other places in the story, we hear Sally, the British Arab dislocated woman as in the following excerpt:

> I wanted to cover my head with the quilt and just lie still in the darkness . . . A policeman visited Khairiyya recently and asked her about the whereabouts of all the girls we managed to smuggle out. You must go with Miss Asher to England.
>
> '*Hinglaand? Fayn Hinglaad?*' . . .
>
> The grey concrete building of Exter Public Library looked like army barracks, but its glass windows gleamed in the warm light of the sun. When I opened the door I was met by a hushed polite silence (Faqir 86).

In the above extract, the first voice the reader hears is that of Salma, the Bedouin illiterate woman. However, there is a sudden shift in the narrative voice, and the reader the reader hears another voice – that of Sally, the British educated woman. This shift may be a consequence of Salma's dual life experience as much as it can be a consequence of displacement and dislocation that lead to the loss of the original voice of an immigrant coming from the Middle East to traverse cultural and linguistic borders to reach the other side of sea.

In fact, the many voices we have in a given story make the text appear as an interaction of distinct perspectives or ideologies, borne by the different characters. The characters are able to voice themselves and verbalize their thoughts, even against the author. The role of the author, therefore, is fundamentally changed, because she/he can no longer manipulate the 'power to mean'. In *Minaret*, the many voices from Khartoum and London make the reader aware of a clash of ideologies: Anwar's secular voice, Omar's careless voice, and the double voice of Najwa which changes from the voice of a careless girl in Khartoum to the voice of a deterriteriolized Muslim maid and baby-sitter in London. At one point in the novel, we hear the voices of Omar and Najwa debating the importance of religion in people's life with two divergent ideologies: "I tell him he should read the Qur'an. It is the wrong thing to say. He shrugs and says, 'These religious things – they are not for everyone.' . . . I start to speak but he interrupts me. 'Don't nag me, Najwa'" (Aboulela 92).

In fact, we contend that the multiplicity of voices which seeks to transmit the *Truth*, is to be found in narratives written by Arab women writers living in the diaspora. We consider the importance of the geographical and psychological dislocation of these authors. In effect, these writers who are hyphenated or hybrid subjects of two worlds and two truths –whether they are Arab Americans or Arab British –   are often looking for the re-representation of a distorted truth. In the Arab American writer Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006), the author employs the voices of many Muslim and non-Muslim women in order to exhibit the true image of Islam in a Western world where this religion has long been misrepresented. Islam, as a truth, is multi-fold and universal; this is why in Kahf's novel, voice has been given to an Iranian Shiite

Muslim woman, a Syrian Sunnite Muslim woman, an African American Muslim woman and others as in "They were four Muslim children of the heartland — two Arab, two black — flying in the blue-and-gold world on their bikes, right through the middle of the 1970s" (p 4). Similarly, in the Regent's park Mosque, Najwa in *Minaret*, re-discovers an Islam that she did not find before back home in Khartoum, an Islam that is mosaic and universal. On Eid occasion in the mosque, Najwa describes the diversity of Muslim women coming to the mosque.[8] She says: "I know what she means. Ramadan [and thus Islam] had brought us close together. For a month the mosque had been full of people" (187).

In a fully dialogical world-view, the structure of the text should itself be subordinate to the right of all characters to be treated as subjects rather than objects. A novel in this tradition is constructed as a great dialogue among unmerged souls or perspectives. Ideas are not presented in abstraction, but are concretely embodied in the lives of protagonists. A dialogical text presents relations as dialogical rather than mechanical or object-like, and avoids authorial finality. Artistic finalization is deemed suspect, though also necessary to some minimal degree. Even in the Arab American poetess Naomi Shehab Nye's fictitious letter, *An Open Letter to Any-Would Be Terrorist*, which she wrote on the eve of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, she writes exclusively about a dialogue between an invisible narrator – who might be the author herself – and an invisible protagonist – whoever wants to be a terrorist. She starts her dialogue right from the beginning of the letters: "I am sorry I have to call you that, but I don't know how else to get your attention. I hate that word. Do you know how hard some of us have worked to get rid of that word, to deny its instant connection to the Middle East?"

As a matter of fact, English texts that are produced by Arab diasporic writers who live in-between two cultures are dialogic in many ways and from different perspectives. They are dialogic because these authors have a double consciousness, double commitment, double perception, double linguistic competence and hence double voice. Likewise, these texts are, to again use Bakhtin's concept, polyphonic in the sense that many voices are intertwined in the narrator's voice.

In analyzing the traits of polyphony in many novels, short stories and even poems composed by writers of Arab descents living in the diaspora, we are pointing to the facts that being hybrid or hyphenated contributes to the production of texts of fiction – novels, short stories, poems and others – that are multi-vocal since many ethnic, cultural, gender and narrative voices are heard. Double-voicedness is a fundamental characteristic of these narratives. They voice two consciousnesses: home and diaspora, English and Arabic, the past and the present.

If Bakhtin sees Dostoevsky as the exemplary exponent of polyphony in Russian literature, we believe that Arab Anglophone women narratives have a similar characteristic. The peculiarity of a polyphonic text, Bakhtin argues, is that the characters are absolutely free from the author's control. The voice of the author is here never dominant and the characters "answer back" with great freedom. The protagonist occupies a unique position in a polyphonic novel. His position is as important as that of the author. He stands along the side of the author, and as another individual human being he listens to the author, responds to him, agrees or disagrees with him. The self-conscious protagonist takes up the authorial work in a polyphonic novel and gives information regarding his/her life in the story from all points of view. As a result, what "the author used to do is now done by the hero, who illuminates himself from all possible points of

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[8] See pages 185, 186 and 187 where you read that Muslim women coming to the Regent's Park mosque are from different places of the globe: Egypt, Djibouti, Turkey, Britain and others.

view" (Bakhtin 49). The main character makes comments not only about himself but also about his surroundings. What is important about the protagonist in a polyphonic novel or other works of fiction is not how she or he appears to the world but how she or he and the surrounding world appear to himself or herself. In this respect, Najwa in *Minaret*, Khadra in *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, Salma in *My Name is Salma*, the displaced woman in *Sandpiper* and the first-person narrator in *An Open Letter to Any Would-be Terrorist* all make comments about issues related to their situation and life-condition as women who see the world differently since they have experienced life differently.

As a matter of fact, the new position of the main character in polyphonic texts requires a totally new method of artistic representation. The author's task in a polyphonic work is reduced simply to discover the "sum total of his consciousness and self-consciousness, ultimately the hero's final word on himself and on his world" (48). The author does not "describe" the hero in a polyphonic novel or short story, i.e. the author does not use his own words to define the protagonist. Instead, the author gives a definition of the main character in the words of the latter:

> The author constructs the hero not out of words foreign to the hero, not out of neutral definition; he constructs not a character, nor a type, nor a temperament, in fact he constructs no objectified image of the hero at all, but rather the hero's discourse about himself and his world. (Bakhtin 47)

This is what we noticed in the many Arab Anglophone women narratives. Female protagonists are created by female authors, but when the reader is involved in a dialogical hermeneutic and responsive process with the text, he or she relies on the protagonist's or the narrator's discourse and often eliminates or denies the presence of the author. In this sense, readers listen to Amal's, Salma's, Asya's, Khadra's, Najwa's, and the *Sandpiper's* 'I' narrator protagonist's voice not to Faqir's, Kahf's, Aboulela's and Soueif's voice.

Conclusion

Throughout the present paper, we gave importance to the narrative mode and the narrative voice dominating writings published in English by female authors of Arabic decent or living in the Diaspora. Our pivotal aim was to deconstruct the nature of the voice in hyphenated and/or hybrid diasporic Arab Anglophone women writings; it is a voice that we identify as polyphonic, dialogic and disrupted. There are many other Arab English fiction books that we could have referred to in order to back up our arguments, but the various works we have referred to in this article are among the most acclaimed, best-selling and widely read Arab English works of literature.

On narration and identity, literary critic Paul John Eakin argues that the narrative – in the broadest sense of "talking about ourselves" (51) – is a fundamental, indispensable component of identity formation: "talking about ourselves involves a lot more than self-indulgence; when we do it, we perform a work of self-construction" (51). In this respect, narration in Anglophone Arab women writings only talks about women, about Arabs and about displaced people. This multi-layered representation has resulted in a heteroglossic and double-voiced discourse as being conceptualized by Bakhtin.

We have focused on Bakhtin's dialogism and polyphony because we believe that Anglophone Arab writings are at heart postmodern. They seek to deconstruct and reconstruct many truths and realities related particularly to the Arab world and to the status of women in the region. However, and unlike postmodern scholars such as Foucault and Derrida, we did not

exclude the authors whose voices are intertwined to a great extent with their protagonists'. The 'death of the author' approach was dismissed in this context because we have stressed the interference of the hybrid and hyphenated state of being of these authors in giving birth to a voice that recalls the past and narrates the present. This voice is both multiple and complex since the hyphenated identity of Arab women writers living in the Diaspora is also complex and multi-layered.

To conclude, the dual identity of Anglophone Arab women writers has given birth to a unique double-voicedness. Throughout this article, we have highlighted how literary techniques of narration such as polyphony, dialogism and heteroglossia genuinely construe the state of hyphenation and hybridization as being experienced by Arab American and Arab British women. Having traveled in many places, met many people, experienced many troubles, talked at least two languages and adopted to many lifestyles make, deliberately or non-deliberately, the voice in hyphenated/hybrid Arab Anglophone writings disrupted and interrupted.

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