Contemporary Arab-American and Middle Eastern Women's Voices: New Visions of "Home"

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CONTEMPORARY ARAB-AMERICAN AND MIDDLE EASTERN WOMEN’S 
VOICES: NEW VISIONS OF “HOME”

by

Abdullah Kheiro A. Shehabat

A Dissertation
Submitted to the
Faculty of the Graduate College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Department of English
Advisor: Gwen Tarbox, Ph.D.

Western Michigan University
Kalamazoo, Michigan
August 2011
Responding to an increase in the literary output of Arab-American and Middle Eastern women in the post September 11th Attacks, I examined three exemplary memoirs: Leila Ahmad’s *A Border Passage*, Zainab Salbi’s *Between Two Worlds*, and Marjane Satrapi’s *The Complete Persepolis*. This study examines these memoirists’ journeys back and forth from their homes of origin to their host homes in the West. In addition to charting how these memoirists break their silence and liberate themselves from authoritarian patriarchal culture and institutionalized religion, I discussed how they construct new feminist identities expressed through the creation of what I term “imagined spiritual homes.”

A major commonality among all these memoirists is their belief that their homes of origin could never be proper sites for their academic, intellectual, spiritual, or artistic ambitions. Although they have nostalgic sentiments towards their homes of origin, they depict these homes as sources of violence, crisis, and oppression. Each of these memoirists then seeks to fulfill her ambitions in a new “host home” in the West, an experience that introduces her to issues of alienation and dislocation, but which also provides her with an intermediary space for the development of an “imagined spiritual home” - a space that symbolizes the union of her personal and professional aspirations.
DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to:

My father! May God rest his soul in peace and reward him Eden.

My father-in-law! May God show mercy on him.

Professor Marwan Obeidat: Thanks for your help and paternal support!
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The completion of this dissertation has been a long journey. Achieving this work could have been hard without the support of several people who guided me along the way. At first, I would like to express my genuine gratitude and deepest appreciation to my advisor Dr. Gwen Athene Tarbox for her extraordinary insight and academic guidance. I have been fortunate enough to have Dr. Tarbox as my advisor. She always impressed me with her dedication to her job. I received my first assignment from her when I was in Jordan, maybe before I was officially admitted at Western. I asked her from day one to be my advisor because I recognized how much care she has given to international students, in particular. Dr. Tarbox has worked really hard with me during the past four years. I shall never forget her efforts in proofreading, gussying, and editing this project. Dr. Tarbox: I want to thank you for your time, encouragement and maternal affection. You are “the” one who has been always supportive of me. I also want to thank you because you opened my eyes to the genre of the graphic memoir which has enriched my areas of interest. Dr. Tarbox, I owe you a lot.

My profound appreciation is also extended to Dr. Jil Larson for accepting to join my committee and for her invaluable comments regarding the content and the structure of my dissertation. Unfortunately, I haven’t had the honor of taking any class with Dr. Larson, but I am glad that her name would be labeled on my dissertation.
I am also grateful to Dr. Karen Vocke for joining my committee. Dr. Vocke presented many useful ideas in the day of my prospectus defense, thus benefiting me in better organizing my dissertation. Although I haven’t taken classes with Dr. Vocke, I have been impressed with her care and support of me during my prospectus defense. Her idea of reducing the texts in my study from five into three helped me narrow my area of interest and made the subject matter of my dissertation more focused.

I am also grateful to Dr. Whitney Womack Smith, my committee’s external reader, for accepting to become a member of my committee and also for her efforts in reading my dissertation.

I would like to thank all the professors who taught, supported, and helped me at WMU, namely Dr. Richard Otz, Dr. Allen Webb, Dr. Lance Weldy, Dr. Todd Kuchta, Dr. Jana Schulman, Dr. Anthony Allis, and Dr. Nick Witchi. I am also indebted to Dr. Jon Adams who impressed me with his dedication and love to his job, and the way he presented his classes. Dr Adams, I wish I had taken more than three classes with you. I also want to thank all the administrative staff in the English Department for their help and support.

I would also like to thank Dr. Jeffrey Angles, whom I had the honor of knowing for the past four years and who introduced me to new concepts in Literary Translation. Dr. Angles, thank you so much for your support and encouragement and for introducing me to a new world of Translation. Dr. Angles has been dealing with me more than a friend. Dr. Angles, Thank you so much; you really made me love Translation.
Acknowledgements-Continued

My gratitude goes to my mother whose unceasing love, supplication, and limitless sacrifice enlightened my way. My mother is the greatest human being on earth. She suffered and endured much pain in her life. She has faith that could move mountains. My mother’s prayer and supplication have always crossed borders and relieved me in the US. May God bless you, mom! I also want to thank my dearest sister Nohad for her love, kindness, and support. May God bless you! I always receive my inspiration from you.

I shall never forget to extend my profound love and appreciation to my lovely wife, Manar. I shall also send a big “thank you” to my beautiful kids, Lujayn, Qusai, and Ayham for their patience, support, and love. Lujayn has a special place in my heart. She has always motivated me by writing “good job Daddy” on my books. Thank you Qusai for your lovely smile and for your innocence; you have been my best friend so far. Also a very big thank you goes to Ayham for always insisting on giving me big hugs and kisses before I go to study in the library. Also, a big thank you goes to the not-yet-born baby, Ammar, who will be delivered in September. You, all, will be my love forever. Special thanks also go to all my 15 siblings for their love and emotional support.

Last but not least, I shall never forget to thank my dearest friends at WMU for their help, patience and support. I also want to send a big “thank you” to all the dinning services team at WMU for their help and support, especially Amir Barbar and Bassem Abuein.

Abdullah Kheiro A. Shehabat
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Overview and Terminology

Although Arab-American literature has evolved very slowly from the 1970s until the present day, there is increasing evidence that the climate caused by the Gulf Wars and the September 11th Attacks has ushered in a new era of Arab-American writing. In my dissertation, I will focus on how and why Arab-American women authors have chosen the memoir as a form through which to represent themselves and their responses to being caught in two different cultures, not knowing whether they belong “here” or “there,” and making it difficult for them to find a true home to which they belong. As part of my study, I will explain how Arab-American women authors who work from a feminist standpoint have altered the form of the memoir to accommodate their perceived subject positions as Arab-Americans and feminists. Most importantly, I will investigate what kind of homes Arab-American memoirists come to develop once their journeys from the homes of origin into their host homes are complete.

For the sake of the present project, I will consult two Arab-American texts: Leila Ahmed’s *A Border Passage* (1997) and Zainab Salbi’s *Between Two Worlds* (2003), and then compare their work to the very popular and accessible memoir *Persepolis* (2002), written by the Iranian French author Marjane Satrapi. Given that many American readers are familiar with Satrapi’s text, I feel that including it in my analysis will help to underscore the pattern that I argue develops when contemporary first generation
immigrant women move from the Middle East to the West and then reflect upon the concept of home.

As I will refer to the terms “Arab American” and “Middle Eastern” repeatedly in this study, I would like to provide definitions. Lampert describes the notion that the “Middle East” is a “cultural construct,” and that it is hard to show the borders between individual countries in the region because the Middle East is represented in the sense of an imagined, rather than a physical and/or geographical space (14). I know that these terms have had a problematic history, especially for some Western audiences who might misconstrue the term Middle East as referencing only those areas inhabited by Muslims or Arabs. Although this term might include Arab Americans as residents in their homes of origin, it may not include them when they move to the West. This may explain why few memoirists who have traveled from any country in the Middle East would consider that “imaginary space” a home. Many Middle Eastern memoirists, such as Iranian-born Marjane Satrapi, share qualities with Arab-American memoirists; they have lived in the same climate of religious extremism; some can speak and understand Arabic, and they share with Arab-Americans some of their socioreligious traditions.

Undoubtedly, the September 11th Attacks have focused attention on the term “Arab American.” Seemingly, this term has been looked at very broadly, but it should be emphasized that Arab Americans are a heterogeneous population, especially in terms of ethnicity and religiosity. Most studies and scholarship have overlooked this notion, thus making it hard to depict a concrete definition that represents the people who belong to it. Steven Salaita hints at this matter and points out that it is not necessary that one group should be representative of another. Arab Americans, by definition, are diverse and they include:
Muslim (Shia and Sunni and Alawi and Isma‘ili), Christian (Catholic and Orthodox, Anglican and Evangelical, and Mainline Protestant), Jewish (Orthodox and conservative and Hraedi and Reform), Druze, Bahai, dual citizens of Israel and twenty two Arab nations, multi and monolingual, progressives and conservatives, Assimilationists and nationalists, cosmopolitans and pluralists, immigrants and fifth generation Americans. (Salaita 1)

Arab-American Literature

Prior to the Gulf wars and September 11 th Attacks, Arab-American literature remained “less understood,” mainly because it was not given much attention in American academic circles (Read 1). Lisa Majaj states that “[a]lthough Arab-American literature has been in existence in the U.S. for over a century, it has only recently begun to be recognized as part of the ethnic landscape of literary America” (n.pag.). Similarly, Carol Fadda-Conrey questions the relative absence of Arab-American literary studies from ethnic canon and suggests that Arab-American literature discourse is placed into the state of “discourse invisibility” which, according to Fadda-Conrey, is considered an ethnic marker. She further emphasizes her argument by citing the feminist Joanna Kadi who describes Arab-American authors as “…the most invisible of the invisibles” (qtd in Fadda-Conrey 1).

Some scholars have attributed the absence of Arab-American literature within American canonical works to political reasons. Mervat Hatem argues that Arab-American literature has always been shaped by the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict and its different wars. During the last sixty years, “overwhelming U.S. support of the Israeli military effort against [Arabs has] galvanized [the Arab Americans]” (Hatem n.pag.). This kind of support to Israel, in fact, might have been one of the reasons that created a
lack of interest in Arab-American literature by American academic circles. It could also be argued that Arab-American literature has been relatively absent and invisible within the American canon because its subjects and themes might not well intrigue American critics and scholars who might prefer topics that seem directly related to the US’s lengthy and widespread engagement with other ethnic minorities such as African-Americans; African-American literature has become a basic component of American literature.

Waves of Arab-American Immigration

In order to provide an understanding of the lives of Arabs in the US, I have consulted the work of Jen’nan Ghazal Read, who notes that Arab Americans have come to the US in two distinct waves, although other critics argue that Arab Americans have come in three waves. Table 1 below sums up these two main waves:

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Waves of Arab-American Immigration to USA</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Period</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>1870 to WWI</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Size</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Nationality migration</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Social class</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Religion</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Settlement</strong></td>
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(Read 5)
Table 1 shows that the first wave of immigration, “early migration,” was comprised of individuals who quickly assimilated into American society (Bilge and Aswad 5), especially as many of them were of the Christian faith and were able to find likeminded communities across the US. Bilge and Aswad explain that the first wave of immigration consisted of “illiterate village men who hoped to return to their homelands [homes of origin] after amassing fortune in America, [and also lacked] education, technical skills, and capital on arrival” (5). However, most of these “sojourners” ultimately desired citizenship because the regions from where they had come, especially the Ottoman Empire, were embroiled in political upheaval (Bilge and Aswad 5). While the first wave may have included some women writers, only names of men became known to a larger reading public, such as those who wrote “diaspora literature,” namely, the Lebanese Gibran Khalil Gibran and Mikha’il Nu‘ayma who created Mahjar School¹ in the United States (Cooke 22). Living in a “heavily assimilationist U.S. context,” first wave of Arab-American immigrants responded to pressures to assimilate, “…while maintain[ing their] Arab identity” (Majajn.pag.).

For the purposes of this study, I have divided Read’s second classification of immigrants into two distinct time periods – the second wave, from 1945-1973 which included those individuals who immigrated due to the Arab-Israeli conflicts, and the third wave, from 1973-the present day which included those individuals who have immigrated from a wide variety of countries, including Iraq and the Gulf states and have immigrated for diverse reasons. According to El-Badry (1994) and Pulcini (1993), the immigrants who came to the US during the second and third waves are “over ninety percent Muslim and more geographically diverse [and] are also better educated and have stronger

¹ Mahjar School refers to Arab writers who lived and published their literary works in Diaspora.
attachments to their nations of origin” (qtd. in Read 6). Bilge and Aswad have noted that many researchers, such as Haddad (1986), Abu Laban (1980), Abraham and Abraham (1983), have confirmed the notion that “the emigration wave that left the Middle East after World War II and continued into the mid-1960s reflected changing circumstances in the newly formed Muslim countries and represented areas which had seen little previous U.S. immigration” (7). For example, the vast majority of Yemenis, Iraqis, and Palestinians came after World War II.

Contemporary Arab-American Women Memoirists

The contemporary Arab-American women memoirists in this study belong to different religions, ethnicities, and cultural backgrounds. Additionally, they have witnessed many major political and military events such as the Arab-Israeli conflict (1984-present), the Gulf wars, the deposition of Saddam Hussein (2003), and the Lebanese-Israeli war (2006), events that have impacted their lives and have served as the subject matter of some of their memoirs. Arab-American women have been inspired to write their memoirs based on their life experiences, as eyewitnesses to those events.

Another biographical fact that has inspired them to write these memoirs is their life in the U.S; most Arab Americans have graduated from American and European schools; they have studied women’s rights and women’s oppression, and also they have read about the life-experiences of other women who have moved from feeling as if they were victims of wars and patriarchal authority to becoming confident and self-actualized human beings. In other words, they have absorbed many aspects of Western ideology and started acting from that perspective.

Ahmed, Salbi, and Satrapi do not differ from many other Western women memoirists in their choice of the literary genres used to represent the themes of identity
bifurcation. While reviewing early and recent works by Middle Eastern authors, readers might well notice that, like their US counterparts, these memoirists have adopted the principle that the “personal is political,” a notion that has been “at the heart of all feminisms,” which also explains why the memoir has become a very popular with women (Buss 3). Bouthaina Shaaban (1993) explains that until the 1950s, Arab-American and Middle Eastern women writers used to represent their familial relations and matters of their personal lives as women.

However, from the 1960s and on, Arab-American and Middle Eastern women authors, especially those who have chosen to write from a feminist stance such as Nawal Saadawi, Khanata Banuna, Leila Ahmed, Assia Djebar, Zainab Salbi, and Sahar Khalifa, have embraced topics that celebrate “broader social and political issues” in addition to topics that arouse women’s “obsession with living up to the opportunities for self-realization or self-fulfillment” (qtd. in Shaaban 36). In addition to the subjects tackled by these authors, the memoirs under consideration ask about the relationship between the self and the other, “the private individual’s relationship to a history and/or a culture from which she finds her experience of herself and her life excluded” (Buss 3).

For instance, Leila Ahmed’s A Border Passage contains elements of alienation and of the quest for identity that are typical of the genre. Ahmed, who seemed to be appreciative of her Arab-Egyptian identity, began to feel estranged from her sense of self after studying a high school curriculum that focused exclusively on Western viewpoints. Instead of encountering content that would contribute to her national identity and diminish feeling of “not belonging,” she suffered from education that focused extensively on the culture of the occupier. She wanted to study more about Egypt: its flora and fauna, its political figures. In describing this time of her life, she foreshadows the
negative impact of schooling on her, as being a “future citizen of Egypt” (Ahmed 152). Below she describes her school days at the English school in Egypt:

We studied arithmetic in pounds, shillings, and pence and we read about the history and geography of Europe but not the history and geography of Egypt. I knew about the flora and fauna of the British Isles and where coal was mined and about the Pennines and the chalk cliffs of Dover but nothing about the Nile and the ancient valley where I lived. Is this really possible, or have I, in the interest of neatness and in some process of internal spring cleaning, simply erased the memory of studying at least the geography of Egypt?...And I knew all about Bismarck and Garibaldi and nationalism in Europe but nothing about Egypt, the Arabs, the Muslims, the Turks. Obviously such schooling had distinct shortcomings for a future citizen of Egypt. (Ahmed 151-52)

Ahmed explains how “estranged” she was in her home of origin, the place that was supposed to launch her identity and create a sense of belonging. Ahmed felt like “an alien” in Egypt because she studied nothing about it at school; the educational system never acknowledged the Egyptian cultural and educational heritage. She wanted to study subjects that forged her national identity; ideas that connected her to “home” and, in the meantime, counteracted the colonial thoughts imposed on her. I argue here that part of the reason Ahmed chose to write her personal experience in a memoir was to criticize, and even to condemn, all the cultural practices that stood like a roadblock in her way to constructing her national identity and living in a home that would not always make her feeling nationally alienated and physically displaced. Here, it is understandable that such an excerpt foreshadows Ahmed’s sense of alienation and estrangement throughout her journey from Cairo until she resided in the US, and these are sentiments that are echoed
in the memoirs of Salbi and Satrapi, though their childhoods were spent in Iraq and Iran, respectively.

The Genre of Memoir

Prior to defining the term “memoir,” it is important to distinguish it from the term “autobiography” especially as some readers, and even critics, mistakenly use them interchangeably, making it difficult to understand or distinguish between the terms, even though “memoir” is much older term in English than is “autobiography.” The reason critics and theorists ignored or even left the literary genre of memoir unexamined is because that the form of the memoir has been identified as “a life-writing practice associated more with history than with literature” (Fass 2). Thomas Larson notes that “[it’s] true that critics have conflated autobiography and memoir throughout [their] literary history” (17). For instance, in 1972, Harry Shaw defined memoir as a “biographical or autobiographical sketch; a record of facts and events connected with a subject, period, or individual; a commentary on one’s life, times, and experiences” (234). Yet, Shaw defined autobiography in light of its resemblance to “several other literary forms: biography, diaries, letters, journals, and memoirs” (39).

Critics such as Morner and Rausch define these two concepts in terms of their time duration; whether or not they represent an “account of all or part of the person’s life,” either written by a memoirist or an autobiographer. They accordingly define memoir as an “account of a single period in a writer’s life, often a period that coincides with important historical events” (131) whereas they defined an autobiography as “…account of all or part of the person’s life written by that person, usually with publication in mind.” (Morner and Rausch 17)
Obviously, the memoir is closely related to the autobiography in terms of being based on events experienced by the author; however, these two terms cannot be considered as synonymous because, as Sven Birkerts explains, memoir is autobiographical by nature, especially when it concerns the self whereas autobiography is “not in any essential way memoiristic” (51). According to these critics, memoir focuses closely on a particular epoch in the author’s life and is clearly meant to include fictive elements. Yet, what makes memoir especially different from autobiography, at least for the purposes of this study, is that it creates some sort of “consistencies and inconsistencies for the reader” (Buss xvi). This gives readers a chance to interact with the narrator, thus making the reader no longer a passive recipient, which, I contend, is the case in autobiography. The narrator, accordingly, as Helen Buss explains it, would depend on someone’s memory, mainly a father, a brother, or even a sister, which eventually creates some “inconsistencies” during the act of narration. Here, the reader effectively “participates in the narrative consistencies,” creating an intense relationship with the narrator who in Kate Adams’s words is the “…participant observer who lends the history she chronicles significance, humanity, [and] insight” (qtd. in Buss, xvi). The reader, in turn, is invited to question all those consistencies.

Among other literary genres, the memoir in American literature “celebrates and values the individual voice,” regardless of whether the voice belongs to man or woman (Buss3). The continuing switch from autobiography into memoir; the shift of authority from facts, represented by history, into voice, represented by memoir; and the noticeable employment of the first person narrator’s pronoun ‘I’ point to the fact that the literary genre of the memoir is becoming one of the most widely used genres among American writers, mainly women. This raises very significant questions that are related to the main
subject of the present study: Did American writers, Middle Eastern and Arab-American women authors, deliberately choose memoir as a means to expressing and conserving their own identities? Did American writers consider ‘memoir’ the last resort after they felt that the autobiographies written in the past were all “male genres?” (Larson 12).

According to Estelle C. Jelinek, many contemporary female authors have switched to the memoir because they have felt they were either misrepresented or even not well-represented by men’s and women’s autobiographies. In her preface to The Traditions of Women’s Autobiographies, Jelinek expresses her dissatisfaction about all men’s and women’s autobiographies written before 1970s as these autobiographies “were not applicable to women’s autobiographies. And all attempts to define the genre [autobiography] were based exclusively on men’s autobiographies” (ix). Jelinek also explains the hardships she faced in tracking the traditions of women’s autobiographies. In other words, there are very few autobiographies whose focus was primarily “on...subject matter and narrative forms and the self-image [of women] that is projected.” (x)

It is noteworthy that, like their American counterparts, contemporary Arab-American authors might have been drawn to the literary genre of the memoir because they, as Jelinek theorized, felt misrepresented by a male-dominated autobiography. Another reason women memoirists have been drawn to the literary genre of the memoir is to “repossess a place in history which she [Buss] believes has been denied them, and to theorize ways that women memoirists avoid pitfalls of autobiographical writing such as the appearance of confession that often accompanies writing about sexual abuse” (Maurer n.pag; emphasis added).
Given the complicated history of the American memoir, it is necessary to explain how I will define the term memoir in this project. In her literary piece titled “The Memoir Problem,” Paula Fass explains that there are some issues that should be taken into consideration when defining memoir (Fass 107). While Judith Barrington defines memoir in terms of the “one theme” it addresses, Fass defines it in light of the person who writes it arguing that memoirs written by famous people may differ in context, theme, and reception from those written by less well-known writers (Barrington 19, Fass 107). Fass asks, “[w]hat is there to be learned from sharing the memoirs of a marginal (though interesting) and complex...human being?” (Fass 108) She further hints at the “challenge” that is developed by the memoir “boom”; memoir has perplexed historians as well as intellectuals who once view it as a “source,” a “historical tool,” an “essential form of writing,” and a “teaching tool” (Fass 109).

Other historians and scholars have defined the memoir differently, giving special emphasis to different criteria. Bill Roorbach defines memoir as a “true story, a work of narrative built directly from the memory of the writer, with an added element of creative research.” (13) Philippe Lejeune defines memoir in light of its relevance to self. For him, “…the memoir is a comment on something outside the self but also part of the self” (qtd. in Fass 122). In other words, it has nothing to do with chronology, which is a distinctive feature of the autobiography. While Harry Shaw defines the memoir as a genre that borrows from many others, Roorbach defines it depending on the source from which the author referred to while writing her memoir and Morner and Rausch argue that the term solely depends on authors’ own intentions.

For the purposes of this study, I will work with Buss’s own understanding of the term; Buss believes strongly that memoir is both an art and a means of life; it turns the
memoirist’s “anger into a more useful personal motivation that it can with practice become an art” (xvi). In accordance with Buss’s theory regarding the central motivation attached to memoir writing, memoir is an art that “document[s]” historical narratives and, by virtue of its form, readers will notice how such historical narrative changes drastically when readers view those narratives from the perspective of women or of women’s lives (Buss xvi). To put it in different words, in the vast majority of third world literature, protagonists embody the “part,” always acting as spokespersons and representatives of the whole by rendering/turning their personal lives into political ones. The rationale behind this is that the memoirist is attempting to “make the traumatic events of isolation as compelling and significant as other ... [political] stories” (Buss xvii). Historian Gerda Lerner has suggested that making women’s personal experiences a “document” for study can help readers “identify how women’s lives are significant to the era” (qtd. in Buss xvi-xvii). Over the last few decades the feminist slogan “the personal is political,” has as Whelehan puts it, “gained impetus among feminists, and the scrutiny of their own life histories [has been] seen as enabling and potentially liberating” (178).

Memoir in the Aftermath of the 1990s Events

Arab-American writers have been impacted by the Gulf War, which broke out in the early years of 1990s when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, claiming that it belonged to Iraq. Clearly, the Gulf War had a very negative impact on Arabs; some countries such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, a number of gulf states supported the United States; Syria and many of the people of Palestine, mainly Hamas supporters, stood beside Iraq; other countries such as Syria, Lebanon, Libya, and Jordan were neutral. Even after the liberation of Kuwait, the relationship between some Arab countries was not good,
especially those that supported Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait. Then, in the aftermath of the September 11th Attacks, the Arab and Islamic world was again impacted by the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. In the US itself, over one thousand Muslim and Arab non-citizens were arrested in the weeks following September 11th, some were deported, and others were detained though they had no any “direct links with the terrorists or their actions” (Malek 241). Malek further explains that five thousand non-citizen immigrants who belonged to Arab and Muslim identities were suspected by the U.S. Department of Justice of “harboring” terrorists (241). These acts of tension, in turn, have complicated the notion Arab Americans’ identity. Since the attacks, Arab Americans have been depicted as “other,” because, as Suad Joseph puts it, many people feel that “…one cannot be Arab or Muslim and American at the same time; that being both, one is neither and therefore not quite a citizen” (qtd. in Malek 230).

In such a climate of political and military turmoil, Arab-American women authors have used these events as a springboard to document history as they actually saw and lived it; they have written memoirs that represent their (oppressed and disappearing) identities and have made their voices heard. It is understandable that Arab-American women writers have resorted to the literary genre of the memoir as they have dealt with an amalgamation of personal and political accounts of single periods in their own lives.

Some Arab-American critics such as Haddad et al. have argued that women’s issues, e.g., women’s oppression, in the Arabic world have always been used as a pretext by the West to “engender emotional support for American adventures overseas.” (4) This argument was emphasized by the First Lady of the United States during the Afghanistan and Iraq Wars, Laura Bush, who, as cited in Haddad et al., stated “[w]e are now engaged in a worldwide effort to focus on the brutality against women and children by the
Taliban.”(3) Similarly, after Saddam Hussein’s dethroning in 2003, the Bush Administration asserted that achieving women’s rights would be a top priority (Haddad et al. 3). In such circumstances of the lack of clearness, the by-product, Haddad et al argue, has been “misunderstanding and prejudice [by] making life more difficult for ...women living in the United States and Canada” (4).

In the aftermath of the 1990s, Arab-American women writers, along with other Middle Eastern memoirists, felt the urgent need to speak out against voices of oppression and against some Arabic former regimes that used to suppress the memoirists’ freedom and silence their voices. For example, Zainab Salbi who, along with her family, had been close to Saddam Hussein, the former Iraqi president, was an eye-witness to unjust deeds that occurred to her family and to many Iraqi citizens. During Hussein’s reign, she was unable to express and/or say “no” to the trauma she and her family were experiencing, but when Hussein was deposed in 2003, she was able to announce the publication of her novel titled *Between Two Worlds*. Obviously, the events that occurred in the last two decades had inspired her to write her memoir, and she was not alone, as a number of outstanding Arab-American poets and authors such as Naomi Shihab Nye, Mohja Kahf, Suheir Hammad, Wlaid Bittar, and Nathalie Handal, have published texts that focus on national and personal concerns (Abdelrazek 18). Clearly, Arab-American women writers have produced an important body of work, and this dissertation seeks to explore the relationship between their lived experience and genre.

Additionally, it is necessary to comment specifically on how the September 11th Attacks have opened up space for dialogue, between the East and the West. Naturally, the backlash in the post September 11th-era had a great impact on Arabs, Arab Americans, Muslims and Christians as well as on many Arab-American authors who
have experienced difficulty because they have been thought of as belonging to the hijackers’ same identity, same ethnicity, and same religion. The September 11th Attacks have become a “turning point rather than a beginning... within Arab American histories and literature”; Arab-American activism and the boom of the Arab-American literature did not begin on September 11th, but national attention to it certainly did increase (Abdelrazek 16).

In responding to the September 11th attacks, the US, along with its strong allies from East and West, Christians and moderate Muslims have declared “war on terror” both politically and militarily. The targeted people of this war include all those supporters of terrorism from Arabs and Muslims, or in George Bush’s terminology, “Islamo-facists,” a term used by Bush in most of his speeches on “war on terror” to “clarify that the war on terror does not apply to all or most Muslims, but to tiny factions” (qtd. in Naber 283). Further, the White House of the G.W. Bush administration has emphasized that war on terrorism is not against “moderate Islam,” but that it has targeted extreme groups in Pakistan and Afghanistan (Haddad et al 3). According to Naber, the events that have occurred in the aftermath of September 11th have “facilitated the Bush administration’s conflation of diverse individuals, movements, and historical contexts such as bin Laden, Saddam Hussein, any and all forms of Palestinian resistance to Israeli occupation, Hizballah [Hezbollah], Hamas, and al-Qaeda under the rubric of ‘...Islamic fundamentalists/Muslim terrorists’ it has also justified war on Afghanistan and Iraq, support for Israeli occupation, Israeli’s war on Lebanon” (Naber283-84). These foreign policy decisions have become reasons for the majority of Arab-American writers, especially women, to tackle issues that concern Arab-American women such as matters of ethnicity, identity, social and cultural displacement. However, according to Haddad et
al, saving Muslim women, especially those who were under Taliban’s regime, has “become part of the post-9/11 Western Agenda” (3).

US foreign policy in the aftermath of September 11th has created a state of nervousness and tension amongst Arab Americans, despite their belonging to diverse religions, ethnicities, and backgrounds. However, many Arab-American feminists and women writers have taken advantage of this opportunity by using it as a pretext for “liberating” themselves. As it was customary that Arab-American women authors were not supposed to be critical of their nations and men, especially during wars, it sounds unacceptable that they would negatively depict their life experiences (Cooke 22). The September 11th Attacks, however, have become an important event for many Arab-American authors by “empower[ing them] to participate in the public arena to pursue their [Arab-Americans feminists’] interests” (Haddad et al. v). These women have taken advantage of the international community’s wish to improve their social and cultural status, especially when they witnessed what happened in Afghanistan; hundreds of women reported being suppressed by the Taliban regime. So, they felt safer at this time to express themselves and to begin writing themselves in the hope of being heard. Moreover, these authors have taken advantage of all the political changes that have taken place in other Arab and Islamic countries, the countries of their origin. Haddad et al. explain that although the September 11th Attacks have intensified the relationship between Muslims and American society, they have paved the way for Arab-American feminists, whether Muslims or Christians, to define their own identities (v).

Contemporary Arab-American women’s memoirs, which have been written in English and targeted towards a Western, principally US audience, have played a positive role in bridging the gap between the two worlds and in the same time in re/shaping
memoirists' original identities. Not only do these memoirs celebrate the authors' own search for identity while immigrating to America, they also harshly criticize all the strict religious, social tradition and also all the policies adopted by some religious groups and “Islamist” factions like Hezbollah, the former Iraqi regime, Iran and all any groups that have lead to what is often termed “Islamic fundamentalism” (Naber 277) or “religious fanaticism” (Wong, et al 255).

Key Themes in the Arab and Arab-American Literature: The Journey and the Spiritual Home

Within the genre of the memoir, Arab-American and Middle Eastern writers have utilized two key themes to discuss the process towards self-actualization: the journey and the creation of a concept that I term “the spiritual home." The word journey in Arabic literature literally means riḥla, meaning that people travel from one place into another in search of something lost or absent in their homes of origin. Generally speaking, journey or riḥla in Arab Literature has two major categories: temporary and permanent. A temporary journey is normally for fun or for education, while a permanent journey is for immigration, escaping wars, escaping political oppressive regimes (exile), and searching for work. In this study, I argue that the term “journey" in contemporary Arab-American literature is an expression representing an escape from miserable economic and political conditions, religious oppression, and patriarchal domination. In this journey, the memoirists in question try to come up with their own spiritual homes after their efforts to do that in their homes of origin had entered an impasse.

Arab travel literature is complex owing to the interaction that often occurs between travelers and the West, interaction that has included political, economic, 

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2 *Riḥla* is an Arabic word which translates into journey or an excursion in English. It is also the title of the Ibn Batuta’s book famous book in which he documents his travel experiences for thirty years.
intellectual, and cultural conflict. In her book *Arab Travellers and Western Civilization*, Nazik Saba Yared argues that such interaction normally creates a crisis within the Arabs’ selves as they become emotionally conflicted, being unable either to conserve their Arab identity or to hold on to a Western identity (8). This conflict normally develops greatly as the traveler or the protagonist starts to communicate with the “other,” absorbs his or her thought and ideology, and eventually accepts or declines the new influences. For example, although Ahmed seems critical of the Egyptian people and of her immediate family for embracing European culture, language, and heritage during the Nasser regime, she acknowledges that the only way to fulfill her ambitions was by traveling to the US. When she arrived there, she started reviewing her oppressive past, and by the virtue of women’s studies, she was able to forge a solid, feminist identity.

Like Arab Literature, Arab-American literature is rich with fictive and non-fictive elements that focus on protagonists’ journeys to the West. Yared stresses the strong role these journeys played in the nineteenth century as a powerful means for introducing the Arabs to the Western civilization (9). In so doing, travelers who got the chance to travel to the West were able to record their journeys and then disseminate them in books, hence making the process of interaction between Arabs and the West more approachable for subsequent immigrants. However, a change in the attitudes and ways of thinking between the two parties, the Arabs and the West, has occurred over time, leading to the sorts of positive and negative interactions that have occurred over the last twenty years (8).

Critics emphasize that works on Arab travelers, who came to the West, had become more abundant in the nineteenth and early twentieth century especially those works on travelers that focused on “…economic, social, literary, scientific, and
technological aspects of the West” (Mackenzie 443). John Mackenzie summarizes how Yared sorts travelers into three chronological eras depending on “changing attitudes and instrumental responses during these eras [or waves]” (443): 1826-1882, 1882-1918, and 1918-1938. The first era, Mackenzie explains, is highly westernized because the majority of the travelers who belong to this era not only adopted Western thoughts and ideologies but also got assimilated in Western societies. For example, one of their concerns was to address aspects of the French revolution and to introduce such aspects to the Middle East. In other words, these travelers, who were mostly Christian converts, sought answers in “Western education” which provided them with a new “vision of free debate, science, the arts and the possibility of scientific proof of supernatural forces” (Mackenzie 443).

Due to the political atmosphere of European colonization in the second era, travelers’ attitudes have changed; instead of embracing the Western ideologies, these travelers were intimidated and concerned with fears of the European imperial ambitions in the Middle East; there was a great deal of “...skepticism...about Western political systems and supposed economic success.” That is, they suspected everything brought to them by the virtue of “Western industrialism.” (Mackenzie 443) This group of travelers developed a strong consciousness of nationalism and other matters of patriotism in its journey to decolonization. They also, Mackenzie adds, recognized the fact that the West owed a great deal to the East as they argue that some of the Western arts are originated from the Arab tradition and culture (443-440).

It can be inferred that the Early Arab travelers’ interest in journeys differ from those contemporary Arab and Arab-American travelers. The concept of rihla, established in the Arab travel literature and consequently in Arab-American literature, typically has narrated the experience(s) of traveler’s life far away from the concerns of the society.
Contemporary Arab-American women authors’ journeys, on the other hand, are “turning points,” intended to enact change, rebellion, and liberation. To illustrate an example, the well-known Arab traveler Ibn Battūta spent almost all his life in journeys. His rihla or journey essentially documented the experiences of thirty years of his life, revealed his personal beliefs, and expressed his own insights (Bosworth 780). Additionally, his journey did not touch on sensitive and international matters, but was primarily focused on issues and matters related to the Islamic world and to great Muslim figures. On the other hand, contemporary Arab-American memoirists or travelers, such as Ahmed and Salbi, have intended their journeys to be of a global perspective. Both Ahmed and Salbi believe in Western education as a power for change and as a solution for women’s subjugated selves; they deal with matters that concern women in general and feminists in particular. These memoirists have dedicated their journeys to all women. As Ahmed puts it,

I am now at the end point of the story I set out to tell here. For thereafter my life becomes part of other stories, American stories. It becomes part of the story of feminism in America, the story of women in America, the story of women of color in America, the story of Arabs in America, the story of Muslims in America, and part of the story of America itself and of American lives in a world of dissolving boundaries and vanishing borders. (296)

The second key theme that I have identified as central to the Arab-American women’s memoir is “home.” Contemporary Arab-American authors typically depict home as a source of violence, alienation, discomfort, and restlessness after it had been a source for peace, friendliness, joy, protection, and calm. However, when it comes to answering the question “what makes a home?” these authors provide different definitions, depending on their political, geographical, and familial contexts. Amal Abdelrazek, in
his own study of Arab American women writers, has raised a number of questions about
the term:

What makes a place home? Is it where your family is? Where you have been
brought up? Is home the place where you have been displaced, or is it where you
are now? How does the movement back and forth between one’s original home
and adopted home shape or shifts one’s view of home? (Abdelrazek 175)

Another significant point Abdelrazek refers to is the idea that there are two kinds
of homes: the original home and the host home, which I am referring to as the home of
origin and the host home, respectively. In Arab culture, home represents identity, so it is
considered a stigma on people who show preference for their host homes over their
homes of origin. This also explains why most Arab-American authors and critics have
been striving to integrate two different worlds, in an attempt to create a careful balance.

Considering the political, social, and cultural changes that have taken place in the
Arab and Middle Eastern worlds during the last century, the term home has developed
many connotations (Abdelrazek 176). Due to these changes, this term was coupled with
confusion and ambiguity. The changes I am referring to also include a number of
enforcement acts practiced by the governments and political regimes that exercised
deportation, exile, immigration, and imprisonment on rebels, exiles, and political and
intellectual leaders. It is predictable that Arab-American and Middle Eastern women
authors have felt anger towards their homes of origin despite their strong feelings of
nostalgia towards them. For the majority, “home” had never been an active location
where they could change, challenge, and break their silence. It is also predictable that the
memoirists’ attitudes towards their homes of origin have been influenced by their
“familial situation and psychological makeup” (Hout 227). However, when intellectuals
move from their homes of origin into their host homes, they are often confronted by feelings of dislocation. This, according to Bhugra and Becker is attributed to moving from societies that prefers familial gatherings and collectivity to individual and egocentrism (19). That is to say, these women normally come from homes where they live with their extended families and where people socialize together all the time, but when they move to live in the West, they miss that familial milieu and accordingly begin to feel alienated.

Given that it had rarely been used as a medium of traditional meaning, the concept of home has gained different connotative and denotative meanings, most of which have their origin in colonial experiences (Abdelrazek 176). This concept therefore did not solely relate to the physical construction (place) where one lived or to the people one socialized with:

[H]ome can represent both where one comes from and where one travels to; it can also represent a tension between the two. Home can be found in group solidarity, in one’s own homeland, in interpersonal relationships, or in all of these sites simultaneously. (Abdelrazek 176)

Other scholars define home figuratively; some of these definitions render home as a kind of asylum or a habitat one uses against dangers; others have associated home to a family’s activities and memories – a place where people accomplish the tasks related to their daily lives. David R. Frazier has defined home as the nucleus for all family memories and activities such as raising children, watching television, [and] entertaining friends (21). However, Donna Divine defines home in light of its political meaning; she explains that the term “gathered its political and emotional resonance as an antidote to exile rather than as a word with its own absolute and independent essence” (66).
Divine’s focal point is that the texts written recently, in the aftermath of the Arab-Israeli 1967 war, have always commented on topics relevant to “individual’s displacement and exile rather on belonging and on home” (66).

This study deals with three kinds of homes as predicted and/or inferred from the memoirs under consideration: the home of origin, the host home, and the imagined spiritual home. “Homes of origin” refer to the memoirists’ places of birth or the homes where they have families and relatives. Some scholars refer to this term as a “parental home,” in that it always functions as reminder of one’s home, family, and the people one socialized and mingled with (Fjellestad 205). I, on the other hand, among others, choose to call it “home of origin” because it cannot be claimed as a personal property for anybody. It is, in fact, a symbol rather than a physical structure. In this study, I will argue that the memoirists I profile have conflicts with their homes of origin based upon gender issues, a point that I investigate in greater depth in chapter two.

“Host homes,” by contrast, are the Western countries where the memoirists in this study have chosen to develop their feminist sensibilities. These homes have provided them with an intermediary space to work through traumatic experiences in their homes of origin. Host homes have also helped these memoirists to build up a reliable financial and educational base from which they could proceed forward to achieve their goals. Host homes most often replace women’s homes of origin and provide them with more social space, religious freedom, and personal choice. However, none of the authors I study chose to idealize the host home – their journeys are often fraught with conflict and include exposure to ethnic and/or religious discrimination.

Indeed, I argue that in order to feel truly self-actualized, the memoirists featured in this study develop what I term “imagined spiritual homes,” designed to help them
achieve their life-long ambitions, especially after they failed to achieve these ambitions in their homes of origin and host homes. While the nature of these imagined spiritual homes may be intellectual, practical, or creative, they become the place in which women achieve self-actualization and encourage other women to do the same.

Arab-American Feminism vs. US Feminism

Given that the authors covered in this study engage with feminist ideas and practices and sometimes find themselves in conflict with Western feminism, a brief discussion of Arab-American feminism and US feminism is necessary. While reviewing the histories of the Arab-American feminism and the U.S. feminist movements, I have found that there are two main reasons that contribute to a lack of communication and collaboration between Arab-American and mainstream feminists. The first cause is related to the way US feminism deals with matters related to Arab-American cultural life; when discussing Arab-American experience, many US feminists have focused exclusively on factors such as the veil, the Hijab, the burgaa, and the manner in which some Islamic women relate to the patriarchy. Recently, Steven Salaita, among others, has criticized the idea of passing judgment on Arab-American feminism by only considering the part rather than the whole; he has been particularly critical of those US feminists who generate an image about Arab-American women by studying the behavior of few Muslim-American women. In other words, he maintains that American feminisms should not look at Arab-American feminism as one “single, unified entity” because not all Arab-American women are Muslims who adhere to strict patriarchal norms (1). One consequence for this kind of relationship has created a gap by always stereotyping Arab-American woman as “…Islamic traditionalists-veiled, submissive, and secluded within the home” (qtd. in Read 2). Haddad and Smith join this critique, noting how some
feminist movements in the West cannot “...free themselves from unfortunate kinds of stereotyping” (37).

The second cause that may have led to the lack of communication and interaction between Arab-American feminism and US feminisms is the former’s lack of experience in the world of feminism theory and discourse, and its lack of experience regarding how to collaborate with the other US feminisms. Nouha al-Hegelan refers to the term frequently used by many Western women which is the “...born yesterday assumption,” indicating that the Arab-American feminism movement has no lengthy history (qtd. in Haddad and Smith 37). Al-Hegelan observes,

Westerners begin by comparing the Arab /Moslem [Muslim] woman to her sisters in the West. Using Western women as a standard is only part of the insult. The injury is magnified by the added assumption that the Arab woman began her struggle yesterday – as if she was somehow born whole out a newly tapped oil well – a veiled, uncivilized no-entity. (qtd. in Haddad and Smith 37)

Clearly, Al-Hegelan expresses her concerns about the lack of political support the Arab-American feminist movement receives. This lack of support, consequently, has created an impasse in the relationship between Arab-American feminism and American feminism, causing much more alienation, separation, and marginalization for Arab-American feminists and also depriving them of sharing a knowledge base with their US feminist counterparts.

However, sometimes Arab-American feminism has been challenged from the inside. That is, some, if not many, Arab-American (especially Muslim) women have argued against all attempts to unify and or coordinate with US feminism(s). These women, thus, would refuse all aspects of Western feminism; they would never accept or
absorb the Western feminist ideologies and patterns of thought. Further, they have believed that whatever might work for Western feminism may not necessarily work for “Islamic feminism,” a term which has created much controversy. This group, in other words, rejects the combination between Islam and feminism, claiming that feminism as a term stands for “whiteness and elitism,” and also they “reject the common assumption that Western feminists formulations of equality are necessarily appropriate in the Islamic context” (Haddad et al. 18, 19).

As I will demonstrate, all three authors featured in this study have had conflicts with US or European feminism along the lines described above. Ahmed, as a professor of women’s studies, has been a vocal advocate for US feminism(s) to recognize and to respect the unique features of Arab-American women’s lives. Similarly, Salbi has encouraged US feminists to possess a more global outlook, and Satrapi has focused on the visual, as well as the textual aspects of feminism in her graphic novels. In other words, although at a microlevel, Satrapi was able to enact change with regard to women who study graphic arts by enabling them to change the style of the veil which they used to wear to become more fashionable and more modern.

Method of the Study

For the purposes of the study, I will consult three memoirs written by Arab-American and Middle Eastern women authors who belong to the second and the third waves of Arab immigration. The texts which I will study are: Leila Ahmed’s *A Border Passage*, Zainab Salbi’s *Between Two Worlds*, and Marjane Satrapi’s *The Complete Persepolis*. In these memoirs, I will investigate how these voices dealt with the different

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2 See Miriam Cook’s *Women Claim Islam*; critics call this term an oxymoron because in the Islamic ideology, they don’t accept the term feminist, so some scholars name themselves unthawiyat, nassawiayt, “womanists” or “remakers of women” (qtd. in Cooke ix).
kinds of homes which they visited and how they finally succeeded in constructing their own spiritual homes that correspond to their ways of thinking, their feminist ideologies, and their professional and personal dreams. In exploring the structural pattern proposed in this study, I will review the memoirists’ journeys from their homes of origin to their host homes where they learned how to construct their own spiritual homes. In each chapter, I will explain some of the challenges each memoirist faced in her attempt to fit into her home of origin. Then, I will explain how host homes did and did not meet the memoirists’ expectations. Finally, I will conclude by commenting on the imagined spiritual home which each memoirist finally created for herself.

Review of Related Literature

There has been much scholarship written on the themes of home, identity, and alienation in Arab as well as Arab-American literature and recently many more studies have been conducted in this field, especially in the last two decades, as the wars in the Middle East and the September 11th Attacks have acted as strong motivators for writers to express their identities, their alienation from their homes, their aspirations for special homes, and their life-experiences regarding dislocation and separation.

Generally speaking, the themes which Arab-American memoirists tackled in the past two decades are related to national and cultural identity (al haweeya), to full citizenship, to cultural customs such as the wearing of the veil, the burgaa, and other costumes, to ethnicity, and, most importantly, to sexual identity. Despite the fact that Arab-American and Middle Eastern memoirists belong to diverse regional backgrounds, there are many commonalities among their literary works especially in light of the themes they tackle; the biggest commonality is the representation of an individual’s personal life
to criticize and to reflect upon the prevailing religious and political life of the group as a whole.

In her piece entitled “Voices of New American Women: Visions of Home in the Arab-American Diasporic Imagination,” Bahareh Lampert comments on the notion of home as a symbol of identity or even as synonymous to identity. She examined how home of origin is seen once people immigrate into another European or westernized home. Lampert offered close textual analyses of Middle Eastern women’s writing across the genres of short story, novel, poetry, and blogosphere discourses in an attempt to provide more discussion about home in the immigrant’s imagination (Lampert n.pag.).

Lampert’s main point is to show “how diasporic women writers [Rachlin, Abu Jaber, and Kahf] struggled to imagine, improvise, or find home between the oppressive and empowering forces of both the U.S and the Middle East” (n.pag.). My study argues against what Lampert theorized. Lampert claims that the host home had never been of help for those immigrants and intellectuals. In response to her point, I found that although host home was not described as a perfect home by the memoirists, it offered a healthy environment for these intellectuals to achieve self-actualization. That said, I do agree with Lampert’s notion about home-making; she argues that “…home-making…weighs upon and fragments the psyche of the diasporic individual by producing feelings of guilt and shame, and imposing a sense of double consciousness” (n.pag.). She infers that home for most Arab-American diasporic imagination is always “…interior rather than exterior [and that it is] “…invented individually rather than constructed communally,” a point that I will refine in my own analysis (Lampert n.pag.).

Said Shehadeh’s piece, “A Psychoanalytic Exploration into the Arab Self and Implications for Therapy with Arabs in the United States,” has also been useful in
shaping my ideas. In this study, Shehadeh explores the “...endemic cultural facets of the Arab self and the manner in which it may manifest itself within psychotherapy” (n.pag.). Shehadeh’s study has shed light on the diversity and fluidity of the Arab self, as it correlates both the past and the present experiences of these expatriates as new Arab-American citizens. Additionally, Shehadeh tackles topics that are related, one way or another, to my study, such as the impression and influence of Islam on the Arabic literature on the family. This might correlate to the topics which the memoirists in my study tackled about fundamentalism and extremism.

In a case study conducted on seven Palestinian families and four adults in Maryland, Faida Abu Ghazaleh revisited the theme of ethnic identity and the role of home of origin in creating and/or reconstructing one’s identity. The study, entitled “Palestinians in Diaspora: An Ethnographic Study of Ethnic Identity among Palestinian Families in Maryland,” attempts to reach an understanding of how those Palestinian immigrants in the U.S. “...construct, maintain, and transfer their ethnic identity through social practices and material cultural artifacts” (n.pag.). Abu Ghazaleh questions the notion of how American society has affected the behaviors, beliefs, and attitudes and values, most of which are definitely originated from religion, of Palestinians in America. It is reasonable that Abu Ghazaleh has investigated all these questions in accordance with the events, mainly political, that re/shaped and or influenced the construction of the Palestinian ethnic identity. While Abu Ghazaleh’s project focuses on how individuals construct answers to their ethnic identity while living in colonial world, the host home, my study focuses on how could individuals imagine and construct their ethnic identities in a trichotomy of homes.
Amal Abdelrazek’s piece entitled “Hyphenated Identities and Border Crossings in Contemporary Literature by Arab-American Women,” looks at four different books; two of them are memoirs which I am using in my study. The question Abdelrazek tries to answer is: how these books uniquely tackled the idea of having a hyphenated Arab-American identity and living in the borderzone. Especially important is Abdelrazek’s focus on how Arab-American writers try to shape an identity in a world, or in a nation, which they consider a “colonizing” one; and she is interested in the fact that these writers try to resist and/or challenge all the political and social conditions and hardships that surround them. For instance, Abdelrazek tries to explain what it means to belong to a nation that wages war against one’s culture, considers one as a terrorist, and depicts one as an “oppressed victim,” while supporting the elimination of Palestine (n.pag.).

Although we share these commonalities, Abdelrazek does not focus on her texts as memoirs. For example, in her introduction to Leila Ahmed’s A Border Passage in 1999, she mentions that by “[e]xperimenting with autobiography, memoir, documentary, history, and fiction, Ahmed crosses geographical, literary, and historical borders of her identity” (34). However, Abdelrazek does not explain and/or correlate to the purpose and the rationale behind the writers’ choice to writing such memoirs along with the theme of “identity.” One of the major goals of my study, in contrast, is to explore how Arab-American and Middle Eastern memoirists purposefully choose to write memoirs.

Another shared thread between our works is that both projects focus on the power of these texts as a means of resisting and/or challenging several Middle Eastern and Arab fundamental regimes as well as in expressing the writers’ feelings about their hyphenated identities, exile, doubleness, and difference—all of which I referred to in my study as alienation.
Another study that addresses the matter of national ethnicity and issues of identity in light of human subjects responses’ is Oraib Mango’s piece entitled “Arab-American Women: Identities of a Silent/Silenced Minority,” in which Mango looks at eleven Arab-American female students to explore the difficulties and past experiences those subjects underwent while attending US schools. One methodological aspect of this study draws on “socio-cultural linguistic views of identity as constructed, displayed, and indexed through talk,” an approach that shows how respondents are fully aware of the established stereotypes that encompass them; they know that they are always depicted as “[o]ther and/or an enemy” (Mango n.pag.). However, there seems to be ambivalent behavior within the subjects’ responses; Mango notes that women’s “reported identities ranged from the least confrontational (being silent) to the most confrontational (speaking up and challenging)”. This range of responses, according to Mango, produces some adverse “internal” effects upon the respondents such as “inner struggle.” I hope to relate these responses to the memoirs that I am studying, as his work and mine both focus on women’s and girls’ search for identity. Like Mango’s study, my study will examine how Arab-American women authors try to take advantage to change their lives through living in the West, whether by gaining a better academic education that would enable them empower themselves or by getting jobs that would sustain them. However, my study will not focus on the psychological dimensions, which can be inferred through studying the linguistic views of the human subjects. Rather, it will explore the merits of choosing the memoir to reflect upon the personal and historical accounts of those protagonists (Mango n.pag.).
The Structure of the Study

In chapter 1, I review the history of the memoir in the last two decades and explain how the literary genre of the memoir has been impacted by the historical and political events that took place in that era, and I explain how Arab-American and Middle Eastern women authors have utilized two key themes, within the genre of memoir, in order to discuss the process towards self-actualization: the journey and what I term “the imagined spiritual home.”

In chapter 2, I discuss Leila Ahmed’s memoir *A Border Passage*, tracking Ahmed’s struggle during her journeys from Cairo, to the UK, to Abu Dhabi, and finally to the US in an attempt to explore a true identity and construct a home for herself and for other Muslim and Arab women, after she failed to do that in her home of origin as well as in the homes that hosted her. After exploring her experience in different homes, I will argue that she creates an imagined spiritual home that is ideological in nature.

In chapter 3, I focus on Zainab Salbi’s memoir *Between Two Worlds*, commenting on the impediments that confronted Salbi during her attempt to forge a feminist identity while she was living in her home of origin, Iraq. Additionally, I comment on her experience as an immigrant to the US and mention some of the merits she gained through that experience. Finally, I will explain her success in turning her mother’s vision of utopian women’s village into her own imagined practical home – a home that involves advocacy.

In Chapter 4, I examine Marjane Satrapi’s *The Complete Persepolis*, focusing on how her journeys back and forth between Iran and Europe culminate in her development of an imaginary spiritual place that draws upon her artistic talent and creativity.
AHMED’S JOURNEY IN EXPLORATION OF THE SPIRITUAL HOME

Overview

A Border Passage is Leila Ahmed’s memoir, written in 1999, a period that was full of heated discussions about religious extremism that dramatically increased in the aftermath of the Gulf war(s). Ahmed, a professor of women’s studies and religion at Harvard University, searches for a true definition of herself in a world that has always viewed her as an “other” and “alien” for being a Muslim, an Egyptian, and an Arab woman. In a number of passages, she expresses the anxiety she has always felt regarding the complexities that have surrounded her identity, especially when she moved from Egypt to the US in the hope of striking a balance between her Arab feminist ideologies and the ones she encountered in her new home. Ahmed has claimed that her memoir could become a guide for Arab and Muslim women who are trapped between the complexities of extreme “official Islam” which was imported to them by men, and the peacefulness of “living Islam” which they inherited and heard about from their mothers and grandmothers. That is why she decided to get her book published in the US, a country that she describes as the only place where one is “free to think and speak” (Interview with Ahmed, n.pag.).

Ahmed’s memoir is considered an important text regarding the Arab-American experience. Ahmed’s challenging yet successful journey back and forth between the Middle East and the West enabled her to transform from a colonized, marginalized, and silenced Arab Muslim woman into a self-determining, active, and powerful feminist. As such, her work has helped to change the prevailing stereotype about Arab-American
women, who have often been seen as submissive, veiled, and male-dominated. Most importantly, this text informed Western readers of the existence of the concept of “the living Islam” which is matrifocal in nature and provides an alternative to the authoritative, official versions of Islam with which most Western academics and feminists have been familiar. Ahmed’s goal has been to change Western readers’ perspectives about how many Arab-American women are brought up amid a rich “tradition of Islamic women” and to argue that Arab-American women can fit into Western culture, adopt aspects of its feminist ideology, and strike a balance between the two worlds (Ahmed n.pag.).

Ahmed’s memoir was received positively by Western critics and readers because it unveiled so many hidden facts and because it challenged stereotypes of Arab-American women. Ahmed clarified the negative role of authoritarian patriarchal culture in Egyptian women’s lives, pointing to the set of strict religious traditions that were imposed on women during and after the Nasser regime; however, she also helped Western readers to understand the multiplicities of Islam, with a focus on “women’s Islam,” a concept that she hoped would overturn stereotypical and simplistic concepts of Islam that have been current in the West. Most reviews of Ahmed’s book term it brave and courageous because she put her culture, home, and identity under the microscope. She criticizes what she feels to be the negative aspects of her culture, leaders, and faith. Yet, she has been sensitive in depicting the other cultures, especially when she describes the world of US feminism.

Ahmed and the Conflict with the Home of Origin

As I argued in chapter 1, Arab-American women authors have used the memoir to reflect on matters related to gender roles existent in their homes of origin. Women such
as Ahmed have been confronted with many impediments and barriers that have often paralyzed their ability to achieve self-actualization. On top of these impediments has been their struggle with the patriarchal culture that often suppresses them in the name of religion and traditions. That is why women thinkers and intellectuals such as Ahmed have started to develop their own patterns of thought about finding healthy environments where they could act. Ahmed’s conflict with her home of origin made it hard for her to consider it a true home. She decided to flee Egypt because she felt that her home of origin might not well be the appropriate place for her ambitions due to the oppressive nature of colonial and religious oppression.

Ahmed’s Experience in her Home of Origin

Ahmed’s journey begins in Egypt in 1940; she was born into a privileged background, yet eventually came to consider herself as a voice for the disadvantaged, the less culturally and educationally advanced. Ahmed could have dedicated her work to writing about some aspects of the privileged life that she and her family lived, or else she could have emphasized the privileges she and her family enjoyed during Nasser’s reign. Instead, she decided to write about the conditions that women experienced in her country as well as the countries where she worked, an authorial decision that made her a voice for all women, regardless of their class, religion, or ethnicity.

In fact, the political conditions in which Ahmed was born played a great role in shaping her identity, developing her patterns of thinking, and motivating her to search for an ideal home. Ahmed grew up during some of the major political transformations that took place in Cairo in the 1940s and 1950s, which she goes on to describe in depth. Egypt received its independence from Britain in 1953 after it had been colonized by both the Ottoman Empire and the British, and since that time, Nasser had made a number of
critical decisions that aimed at developing Egyptian industry and commerce. Nasser’s main focus was to create an Arab identity to replace both the Ottoman and the British identities created during the colonial era. He tried to create this change because Egypt’s identity was foreignized by its colonial occupiers (Ahmed 7-12).

Ahmed’s childhood made her home of origin, Cairo, in her eyes look very unfamiliar. Despite Ahmed’s love of Egypt with its natural beauty, she resented the political and colonial atmosphere in which she lived, along with the events that shattered her family and that idea that her country always thought highly of the European culture of the British colonizers (qtd. in Ahmed 3). Ahmed was brought up by Nanny, a 66-year old Croatian woman, whom Ahmed loved so much because of the stories she told to Ahmed about the “world of unseen” (Ahmed 3) and the world of ghosts and imagination such as the ghoul (Ahmed 52). Separated from Nanny, when Ahmed was a little girl, Ahmed started to feel a great misery and dread (Ahmed 51). Below, she explains how she looks confused as she describes her position within her family when she learned that Nanny could be dismissed – that she was merely a servant, not a member of the family:

Who else could be dismissed: could I be dismissed? Servants could be dismissed. Nanny wasn’t a servant, but she wasn’t a parent either. Were we, was I, more like a servant or parent? Like Nanny? I think I felt occupied some marginal space, that I didn’t belong quite at the center, where my parents and may be even my siblings were. That I could be left out of things and may be they wouldn’t notice. (Ahmed 57)

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4 This quote comes from a passage provided by the publisher of the book. See A PENGUIN READERS GUIDE TO A BORDER PASSAGE, p 3.
5 It is an imaginary animal used in Arab fairy tales narrated by old men and women. It is normally mentioned to attract kids’ attention and sometimes to scare them.
Ahmed also felt that the era in which she was brought up compromised her ability to consider Egypt a home and consequently a significant part of her future and academic career:

I grew up in the last days of the British Empire. My childhood fell in that area when the words “imperialism” and “the West” had not yet acquired the connotations they have today—they had not yet become, that is, mere synonyms for “racism,” “oppression,” and “exploitation.” (Ahmed 5)

Ahmed observes that in 1952, Nasser adopted new national slogans of *Uruba* and *Arabness* to fight the previous foreign identities such as the “African, Nilotic, Mediterranean, Islamic or Coptic” (Ahmed 11). Moreover, he constructed a number of industrial projects that aimed at developing the country, such as building the High Dam and nationalizing the Suez Canal, projects that European leaders viewed as a threat to their hegemony in the region and used as a rationale to wage a war on Egypt. Additionally, Ahmed witnessed the Arab-Israeli conflict in the late 1940s which resulted in the creation of Israel, an event that contributed to the political instability of the region and impacted the way that she and others viewed the growing dichotomy between the terms “Arab” and “Israeli.” In Ahmed’s view, Nasser used the conflict as a pretext to put forward ideas about Arab nationalism and Arab Unity.

All of these political changes were taking place against the backdrop of economic hardship in Europe, America, and the Middle East. As Finifter points out, in such situations, a lack of trust between individuals and governments can ensue, as alienated citizens became more likely to support third parties or minority group interests (693). In the case of Egypt in the 1950s, Ahmed witnessed the increasing power such groups that came into the political scene after the government failed to fulfill its promises. Many
highly-educated Egyptians, especially graduate students, felt they could not trust the government, so they turned to other opposition organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood (Ahmed 6-7). However, they discovered later they were only living in a “climate of virulent Islamophobia” (Elia 155). That is, despite the emotional and financial support that the Brotherhood promised to offer them, they never healed the injustices practiced against them by the political/colonial system as well as by religion.

In fact, that climate of Islamophobia, in my view, was created because of the rise of fundamental Islam. Most Egyptians found themselves trapped in the circle of fundamental Islam which was first established by the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) in the late twenties and emerged as a very secret yet powerful political influence (Ahmed 7). The founder of this party was the Islamic intellectual Hassan al Banna (McDonough n.pag.). Spread all over Arab countries, the Muslim Brotherhood adopt the slogan “Islam is the solution,” to counter all the crises that faced Muslims especially with the rise of modernity. The teachings of fundamental Islam spread to a great extent during the 1930s and 1940s because of the intellectual emptiness and depression that occupied people’s lives and also because of the way this Islam was presented. The founders of this Islam claimed that they were applying the rules of Islamic Sharia as taken from the Quran. Many strict rules and teachings were dictated against women due to the literal interpretation of the verses of Quran, therefore they accepted only one interpretation of the Quran.

This climate of Islamophobia had a doubly-negative impact on Arab and Muslim women, especially those who came to the US. In addition to being silenced and suppressed, Arab and Muslim women were always depicted as “powerless,” “harmless, and redeemable” victims of religion, especially by Western women and women of other
faiths (Elia 155, 158). This point once again supports my argument about Ahmed’s intent to become a voice for these women—I will provide more elaboration about this topic later in this chapter.

These rules and teachings which were imposed on women by Sheikhs, Mullahs, and Ayatollahs, highly celebrated men and their power over women but ignored most of the privileges and rights traditionally granted to women, such as their rights to inheritance, equality, work and holding high positions. In their belief, women were only “cornered” at home. Additionally, these teachings were designed to give more dignity and superiority to men but depreciate and devalue women. In the excerpt below, Zeidan (2001) sums up the reasons for which fundamentalism was established:

It [The Islamist political movement, Islamic fundamentalism, or Islamism] is partly a reaction to the severe crises of modernity converging with the rise of charismatic prophetic leaders. It is both a religious reform movement and a political ideology that includes a social element of protest by have-nots against an oppressive order, as well as a counter-attack on secularism, which has reduced the power of religion in recent decades. (n.pag. emphasis original)

In the midst of these chaotic religious, social, and political conditions, Ahmed’s upper-middle class family had lived a very privileged life due to her father’s work as an Egyptian engineer who chaired the Nile Water Control Board and the Hydro Electric Power Commission. Additionally, part of the Ahmed’s family’s financial position was attributed to her mother’s ancestry. Ahmed mentioned that her father “consolidated his high status in life by marrying the daughter of an upper-class Turkish family” (Ahmed

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6 This is an Islamic way of explaining the concept of “separate spheres” ideology.
7 Unfortunately some of these rules and regulations are still active until these days. An examples is Zawaj Al Mota3ah [translates into Wedding for fun], another name of adultery but under the name of religion; this kind of marriage is only celebrated by Shia Muslims.
46. She further mentions that it was very unusual that middle-class people would benefit from the “country’s prosperity” unless they had very strong connections with the country’s institutions:

Not everyone, though, benefited from the country’s prosperity. Middle class people like my father, who managed to get a modern education and thus to join the professional classes, did well, and so did the landed classes, who benefited from the improved irrigation projects and transports system in which the British invested, the country’s revenues. (Ahmed 39)

This excerpt also sheds light on the idea that those who benefited from the privileges of the country’s prosperity were those who either had strong connections with Nasser or who had some cooperation with the colonizer. However, Ahmed’s father came into conflict with Nasser, when he opposed Nasser’s venture to build the High Dam in Aswan. He claimed that building a dam would create many adverse ecological consequences. At this point, when Ahmed’s father would not silence his objections, along with the escalation of the government against his views, the family’s relationship with Nasser’s regime worsened and her parents were put “under sequestration” (Ahmed 202).

It should be pointed out that Ahmed had already begun developing her feminist views and spared no effort in support of Arab and Muslim women’s right prior to her family’s losing their social rank, i.e., when they were put under sequestration by Nasser’s regime. Ahmed’s wish was to become a voice for the poorly-represented and oppressed women prior to her family’s experience of the miserable financial status that would later plague them. In other words, I am arguing against critics, especially third world literary critics, who might accuse Ahmed of turning her efforts to women’s rights only when her family began to experience these financial hardships.
In fact, Ahmed’s interest in joining the world of women’s studies and therefore becoming a voice for the less educationally and economically advanced had been inspired by her mother’s fascination with Huda Shaarawi, a very prominent Egyptian feminist who had empowered the world of Arab and Muslim feminism with rebellious acts, efforts create a sense of justice for all women who felt discriminated against. These efforts were essential because at that time because most families showed a preference for boys over girls (Ahmed 96). Shaarawi was twelve years old when she was forced to marry an old man, and also she was the first Arab feminist who “formally set aside her veil” after returning from an international women’s conference in Rome (Ahmed 94). Ahmed explains her mother’s interest in Shaarawi:

The reminiscences of Huda Shaarawi are so evocative that sometimes I hear my mother’s voice in the words, particularly when Shaarawi allows her personal voice to break through her otherwise formal voice. In those moments Shaarawi is often speaking of gardens, remembering their loveliness and how she found solace in them, taking refuge there from some wound inflicted by the human world. (Ahmed 96)

Ahmed’s desire to defend women’s rights at an early age refutes the notion that feminism is or has been an unknown quantity in the Middle East, especially in seemingly conservative regimes such as Nasser’s. Ahmed had always supported women’s matters, even if these matters called into question her religious or social traditions. For instance, Ahmed tells the story of how her father refused to marry the woman he proposed to prior to her own mother – this story serves as a springboard for Ahmed to criticize the strictures of her culture:
On his way out he [Ahmed’s father] saw [the young woman whose hand he had just requested] trying to catch a glimpse of him from behind the mashrabiyya, the elaborate woodwork lattice that, in those days, shielded the windows of the women’s quarters. Or perhaps someone told him that she had tried to get a glimpse of him, for how could he possibly have been sure it was she behind the lattice? In any case, he was shocked: if he was content to marry on the basis of a description and a photograph, she too should have been. (Ahmed 95)

Clearly, Ahmed criticizes her father for withdrawing from a marriage with a young woman because she only tried to take a look at her future husband:

Who would have thought, though, that a man who would one day send his daughters to college in England and who throughout his life would give his wholehearted support to women’s rights would think a woman improper for wanting to sneak a glimpse of her future husband—so improper that he would withdraw an offer of marriage? (Ahmed 95)

Here, it is axiomatic to infer that Ahmed had developed these feminist perspectives as she witnessed and heard about real-life stories from women in Ain Shams, and also throughout socializing with the community of women in Zatoun when she used to visit her grandmother. Therefore, her choice was not influenced by the class or tradition to which she belonged. Like the vision which Shaarawi adopted her dream was to achieve justice for all women regardless of all other political, social, and religious considerations.

In this regard, it becomes clear that Ahmed’s childhood days were not like those of the vast majority of Egyptian girls of her age. She mentions that she never lived a “baladi life,” a term which in the Egyptian folk culture refers to people who are
“backward and uncivilized,” mainly the poor and lower class (Ahmed 24). The colonial/political climates in which she was born had partially shaped her outlook. However, during her childhood she recognized the obsession her family had for everything European, a feeling that encouraged her to absorb the ideology of her family, especially her father who started acting from the perspective of the English through his dress, habits, and attitudes.

Ahmed further hints at the notion that her life, from very early childhood, weighed her down with increasing feelings of always being internally colonized. Although she was born and brought up in a privileged family, it seems that her life had been always overburdened with a “colonized consciousness” (Ahmed 25). The political wisdom which she learned during her childhood made her question very critical subjects, proving that she had always been a critical thinker. She describes the social conditions in which she found herself, along with her family, preoccupied with “colonial beliefs” therefore celebrating the other’s culture, tradition, and patterns of thought. She explained how her father had fallen victim to the occupier’s tradition:

I began to realize that it was not only in texts that these hidden messages were inscribed but that they were, too, in my own childhood and in the very roots of my consciousness. I had grown up, I came to see, in a world where people, or any rate my father, had not merely admired European civilization but had probably internalized the colonial beliefs about the superiority of European civilization. (Ahmed 25)

Ahmed attended a school whose educational system was patterned after the English system. The school, she claims, taught content that only celebrated the power and hegemony of the occupier, the English and/or the Europeans. The school was
administered and staffed by British teachers and principals except for Arabic teachers, who also dealt with Ahmed in a very colonial-like manner. The contents of the curricula Ahmed studied tackled nothing about her Egyptian culture, heritage, language and art. Below, Ahmed points out how the curricula always cherished everything European and Western while it discarded any content related to her culture. She describes the educational content along with some of its deficits:

We studied arithmetic in pounds, shillings, and pence and we read about the history and geography of Europe but not about the history and geography of Egypt. I knew all about the flora and fauna of British Isles and where coal was mined and about the Pennines and the chalk cliffs of Dover but NOTHING about the Nile and the ancient valley where I lived. Is this really possible, or have I, in the interest of neatness and in some process of internal spring cleaning, simply erased the memory of studying at least the geography of Egypt? I seem to know something about floods and silt and the rains in Ethiopia and the branches of the river and the delta and agriculture and exports and so on—was this not from school? And I knew all about Bismarck and Garibaldi and nationalism in Europe but nothing about Egypt, the Arabs, the Muslims, [and] the Turks. Obviously such schooling had distinct shortcomings for a future citizen of Egypt. (Ahmed 151-52 emphasis added)

The nothingness that Ahmed describes is a clear sign of the cultural hegemony practiced against her culture. In addition to the problems she had with the curricula, she was treated in a racist manner by some of her teachers. For instance, her science teacher, Mr. Price, never gave her grades and he accused her of cheating although she was a high achiever. Another example that supports Ahmed’s claim was when she asked
Mr. Price to help her choose between art and science. In responding to her quest, he was firmly against her majoring in science. In a similar situation, the math teacher, Miss Minty, refused to recommend her to study Astronomy claiming that “women simply didn’t” (Ahmed 145). Not only did these teachers influence Ahmed’s mentality in a negative manner, but they also criticized her Egyptian heritage, civilization, and language:

But it was not only Mr. Price who discouraged me. The only kind of scientist I thought I might want to be was an astronomer...I went to talk to my math teacher, Miss Minty. She said she could not recommend astronomy, but I was confused as to her reason and that was because she herself conveyed it only very ambiguously. (Ahmed 145)

Then she adds,

No doubt other teachers shared the prejudice that Mr. Price exemplified, but these were not things I was alert to, and even with Mr. Price, while I had sensed that something was amiss I had not understood what. I remember feeling uneasy, for instance, at his telling us how the art and artifacts of the Egyptian proved that the Egyptians did indeed have a civilization but also showed that they lacked the capacity for abstract thought. (Ahmed 145-46)

However, after finishing high school in Ain Sham, Ahmed had great ambitions in mind, but she realized that these ambitions would be hard to fulfill as long as she remained in Egypt.

Despite Ahmed’s positive understanding of the privileges and merits she and her family enjoyed under Nasser and the positive role in providing her with a sense of “integrity, clarity of vision, and open-mindedness,” she felt that these merits could not
free her and her family from the ‘embedded’ colonial beliefs that occupied them. She accordingly desired to pursue her undergraduate degree at Cambridge, England. This feeling of being colonized always reminded Ahmed, throughout her childhood until maturity, of the difficulty of trying to fit in any world that would define her as a woman, a Muslim, an Egyptian, and an Arab. Once again, this raised Ahmed’s eagerness to pursue her degrees in Europe, a decision that reflected on her feelings of distrust and lack of confidence in her country’s educational system. It additionally reflects on her strong desire to move to a place that would grant her more feminist space, more freedom, and, most importantly, more knowledge. Another reason for her wish to leave Egypt was that she did not want to attend any of the local or international schools in Egypt because of the philosophies used in teaching; students were only expected to accept whatever the lecturer said “verbatim” without being able to argue against these ideas (Ahmed 178). Ahmed therefore sought to think of other alternatives where she could academically excel and freely speak out.

Ahmed’s experience at school had enriched her with better understanding of some new concepts with which she used to be unfamiliar. She realized how identities were shaped by politics. She, for example, attributed the conflict that between her and Miss. Nabih to political and historical reasons rather than personal and/or academic reasons. She explained that Miss Nabih, the Palestinian refugee Arabic teacher, hated her not because she didn’t master Arabic language, her mother tongue, but because she belonged to an upper-middle class that she considered responsible for the corruption that occurred in Egypt and which accordingly led to the occupation of Palestine in 1948 (Ahmed 148-49). Similarly, Ahmed learned the meaning of religious discrimination when Mr. Price
showed prejudice against her; he expressed his dissatisfaction that Ahmed had been academically ahead of her Christian friend, Jean.

On the other hand, it is necessary to indicate that Ahmed’s experience at school had plagued her with some psychological and emotional harm. She mainly complained from some aspects of cultural and linguistic alienation. To understand these aspects, I need to examine Ahmed’s experience as diagnosed by some post-colonial critics because her experience as an Arab-American woman author illustrates a useful example that explains the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized.

Cultural Alienation in the Home of Origin

Generally speaking, educated people who suffer from the hegemony of colonial systems are expected to go through some aspects of cultural alienation. Frantz Fanon (1967) theorizes how the colonized subjects, such as Ahmed, feel culturally and intellectually alienated.\(^8\) Fanon mentions two factors that work together to create a feeling of alienation suffered by colonized subjects, which also applies to many Arab-American scholars and critics.\(^9\) The first is that the colonized subject is humiliated as he or she is constantly blamed for belonging to “no culture, no civilization, [and having] no ‘...long historical past.” Here, Fanon abhors the notion that whatever the colonized has is always seen as inferior compared to that of the colonizer, creating an endless kind of psychological conflict in the self of the colonized subjects. Yet, Fanon wonders how the colonized “...subjectively adopts a white man’s attitude”. The second is that the colonized subject is always given the impression that everything he or she learns and/or

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\(^8\) Based on recent research by some Arab-American critics and scholars, the term ‘colonized subjects’ also applies to Arabs living in America, especially in the post of September 11th Attacks. See Salaita’s *Arab American Literary Fictions, Cultures, and Politics*, 2007.

\(^9\) This study like much scholarship on Arab-American Literature argues that both Arab Americans and African Americans have a similarity of being dealt with as colonized subjects, exactly as Fanon represents the Negroes.
develops is actually originated by the colonizer, an attitude that helps kill the colonized subjects’ intellect. Here, Fanon argues against all critics who claim that the main reason for underestimating one’s self and adopting the colonizer’s attitude is attributed to the authentic feeling of inferiority that exists in the colonized mind. Instead, he argues that no scientific evidence is needed to prove the hypothesized relationship between the colonized and the colonizer; this relation assumes that the colonized instinctively feels inferior to the colonizer. But Fanon refutes this by attributing this feeling of inferiority to an “arsenal of complexes that has been developed by the colonial environment” (Fanon 34, 30, 147).

In fact, Fanon’s notion about the colonized attraction to everything European or everything that brings him or her closer to the colonizer might well explain Ahmed and her family’s strong desire to esteem everything European, or in Fanon’s exact words, everything that belongs to “the explorer” or to “bringer of civilization” (Fanon 146-47). Ahmed hardly felt that she belonged to her cultural identity despite her strong attachment and nostalgic love of her culture. According to Fanon, the incident of showing love and appreciation to the other’s culture would always leave the colonized confused with a state of more inferiority due to the fact that he or she would be rejected by the “civilization which he [or she] has none the less assimilated” (93). This also explains the alienation existed in Ahmed’s self due to the “inferiority complex” that plagued her (Fanon 93).

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10 See, for example, Dr. H. L. Gordon’s article in *The East African Medical Journal* (1943).
It is important to reflect on Ahmed’s experience with language especially when we tackle matters of home and identity in her memoir. Language, according to Fjellestad, is the “linguistic home” and eternal identity of intellectuals and critics (205). Although Ahmed sought to choose the colonizer’s language, she expressed her alienation from Arabic language, her mother tongue. As Fanon previously argues the colonized always have interest in the colonizer’s imperial attitudes despite the colonizer’s attempts to, as Wa Thiong’o emphasizes, annihilate all cultural aspects that belong to the colonized especially his language (3). Ahmed resented setting her mother’s tongue aside and replacing it with the language of the colonizer:

In Cairo, it was entirely ordinary, among those classes, to grow up speaking English or French or both, and quite ordinary to attend an English or French school. It was taken for granted among the people who raised us that there was unquestionably much to admire in and learn from the civilization of Europe and the great studies that Europe had made in human advancement. No matter that the European powers were politically oppressive and indeed blatantly unjust; nor did it seem to matter that the very generation which raised us were themselves locked in struggle with the British for Egypt’s political independence. (6)

I think Ahmed’s choice to write in English rather than Arabic does not indicate that she was westernized or that she was writing to please the Western audience. Most critics supported the view that writers need to use their native language in describing their colonial beliefs, a technique that empowers one’s own language by forging a strong linguistic identity. According to Fanon, opting for one’s native language is the best means to recover from the “inferiority complex” that leads to the “death and burial of
cultural originality.” Fanon observes that the colonized tendency to talk like a white man by putting the language of the colonizer on top of the native dialects is a sign of cultural dislocation. Additionally, he notices that people who would value the other’s language mistakenly think they would become more powerful and also “closer to being a real human being” as the “[m]astery of language affords them remarkable power” (Fanon 18, 21). Drawing upon the same theme, I argue that Ahmed’s choice to write in English, the language of the colonizer, is partially intended to educate the Western readers about the new Arab American experience and the new look of the Arab and Muslim women.

Definitely, Ahmed’s focus on not being very well-versed in Arabic language explains why she chose to write in English. It also proves that being distanced from her language had plagued her with more cultural and linguistic alienation. In her attempt to read her father’s memoirs which he wrote for some scientific papers, she did not feel sorry for not remembering her father who passed away, but she feels sorry that she was unable to read his “cursive Arabic script” (23). She felt so estranged:

But how did it happen, I have sometimes found myself wondering, that someone like Father, who loved Quran, as he clearly did, had somehow neglected to see us to it that his children would have as sure a command of its language-written Arabic-as he had?...But why not also classical, written Arabic? We were completely fluent in spoken Arabic, but not in the written language. (Ahmed 23)

Especially annoying for Ahmed was the view that her family and the educational system in her country always considered the English language “superior” to the Arabic language. She blamed her parents for being ignorant in Arabic, thus adversely affecting her fluency. At school, students could speak English, but they were not allowed to speak Arabic even at the playground. At home, although Ahmed and her family used to speak
Arabic along with English and French, English, to Ahmed’s surprise, soon become the children’s favorite language. Similarly, even the movies they watched were spoken in English and only represent the European “glamorous worlds” (Ahmed 23).

It is worth mentioning that feeling linguistically alienated is not very unusual among post-colonial critics and writers. Fjellestad explains how Edward Said and Ihab Hassan, two famous Arab American memoirists and critics, expressed their alienation from their Arabic language although they excelled in English and French. While Hassan complains that Arabic had always been his weakest point, Said expresses his perplexity about which was his first language, English or Arabic. Like Ahmed, in his memoir *Out of Place*, Said expresses his linguistic alienation; he felt that Arabic language had been distanced from his academic profile and that it had no clear natural position to play within the “complexities of the political situation” (qtd. in Fjellestad 205). He believes he suffered due to the fact that because the languages he mastered would never become his; “Arabic was forbidden and ‘wog’; French was always ‘theirs’ not mine, English was authorized, but unacceptable as the language of the hated British” (qtd. in Fjellestad 205).

In my view, Ahmed fled her home of origin into the host home for two reasons. The first reason involved Ahmed’s increasing feeling of internal displacement and alienation while she was in Egypt. Despite her profound emotional attachment to her country, she expressed her desire to flee because she was incapable of fitting into “three different worlds under the blue skies of Egypt” (Ahmed 154). She was unable to adopt living in three different worlds in a time when she didn’t feel belonging to any of them. One shortcoming that characterized these three places, in Ahmed’s view, was that the three worlds --Ain Shams, Zatoun, and school—were full of contradictions, being fully equipped with “their own particular and different worlds with their own particular and
underlying beliefs, ideals, [and] assumptions" (Ahmed 180). In other words, these places never looked harmonious, a thing that troubled Ahmed with feelings of estrangement and dislocation.

The second reason that made Ahmed think of leaving Egypt was her feeling of mental and emotional loss, especially with the many changes that took place in Egypt after the revolution of 1952 (Ahmed 62). Here, she refers to two factors that explained her definition of “home,” family and emotions. Of course, the loss of one of these would lead to the loss of the other. Ahmed describes the emotional state in which Nanny passed away, who, in Ahmed’s belief, died among “strangers.” Despite the intimate relationship with Ahmed’s family, Ahmed, by referring to her family as being “strangers,” assumes that “home” meant family. When she speaks about the death of Nanny, she mentioned that “home” for her became a complete mystery. She describes how Nanny’s “home” looked more different when she lived with and among “strangers”:

[Had] she died when I was just a little older I would surely have known the name of the town or village she was from, and what her home and parents had been like, and if she had sisters or brothers, and what it was like to leave home like that and live all one’s life, every moment, among strangers. (Ahmed 66)

Evidently, the excerpt above shows that Ahmed’s perception of the term “home” has completely changed. At this point, it primarily depended on the emotional meaning of the term rather than the physical one. Additionally, from the excerpt, we can see the strength of Ahmed’s feminist compassion. Throughout the work, Ahmed sympathizes with women who are treated as “strangers.” More importantly, Ahmed is able to reach out to a wide range of forgotten women regardless of their origin, culture, and social rank.
Given that Ahmed experienced all these difficulties and hardships at her "home of origin," it is reasonable to conclude that she did not want to be trapped in such authoritarian patriarchal culture. She also wanted to escape the climate of religious fundamentalism and extremism that forced her to be silent. For her, the home of origin could never represent her ideal ambitions and could never give her the feminist space she always sought. It only plagued her with more internal displacement, cultural and linguistic alienation. Absolutely, she pinned her hopes on the Western world, especially after she heard and read some stories of success of other feminists who traveled to the West and were able to create ‘change’ in their lives as well as in other women’s lives.

England: The First Host Home

In fact, the major positive experience Ahmed learnt at her home of origin was that she was able to develop some feminist views about the status of women and how miserable their lives had been there. She also benefited a great deal from reading about the experiences of some major feminist figures such as Huda Shaarawi. However, she was expecting to gain more in the ideal worlds she imagined in the West, and in particular in England at Cambridge University.

However, by reviewing Ahmed’s academic and social life at Cambridge, the reader might find that the ideal home which Ahmed was looking forward to finding did not emerge, or to be more accurate, was not as ideal as she had expected. Still, Ahmed came to believe that her journey to England had positive impact. By and large, it broadened her thinking and intellect abilities, enabled her to understand her self, and taught her how to deal with traumas of alienation and separation. Cambridge, as her new home, functioned like an intermediary space that enabled Ahmed to move along on her journey to eventual self-actualization.
After passing qualifying exams, Ahmed was admitted at Cambridge University. She studied English literature, a major which she appreciated because it helped her explore the beauties of nature as well as the unexplored merits of one’s self. She found solace in reading Thomas Hardy because of the way he incarnated nature’s elements; dealing with these elements as if they were human beings. This feeling never made Ahmed view these elements as lifeless, but she always dealt with them as a good resource of “companionship and solace” (Ahmed 14). Another point that made Ahmed admire Hardy’s writings was his way of dealing with some forces of nature and society which were employed against man. She observes:

Other things too had made Hardy particularly resonant for me. His sense of some force--nature, society, something--inexorably set against man, fundamentally primed to crush and defeat him, gave voice to my own sense, then, of our puniness before blind and stupid forces, before which we were as nothing. (Ahmed 14)

Additionally, Ahmed was also influenced by William Butler Yeats. She read Yeats’ works which helped her address and heal from the stressful situations that plagued her when she was in Britain. When, for example, she received the news of her father’s death in Egypt, she felt so lonely and isolated: “[t]here is nothing in the world around [her] to indicate that anything of any significance whatever has happened” (Ahmed 217). At this point, her only spiritual support was to read some of Yeat’s works whose themes address issues of “reincarnation,” an emotional feeling that granted her a kind of spiritual and telepathic power which eventually helped her to feel connection with her dead father.

Overall, Ahmed’s life in Girton College, her host home, looked more promising educationally than did her English school in Cairo. Because Girton became a familiar
place like Ain Shams, it provided Ahmed with a sense of comfort and optimism. Professors, unlike those at senior school in Egypt, showed respect to Ahmed by praising her choice of reading some feminist works at an early age, such as Virginia Woolf’s essay *A Room of One’s Own*. They also appreciated her private and “secretive” issues, and helped her develop her talents (Ahmed 180). Her supervisors, Miss Brad and Mrs. Madge, gave her excellent grades on her essays despite her lower achievement in the university exams.

However, while in Britain, Ahmed was the target of many racist attitudes that changed her ways of thinking. She had never addressed any kind of racial attitude before which made her to begin thinking of new concepts that, however, broadened her way of thinking. In other words, she began to recognize how the surrounding environment at Cambridge viewed her. However, these attitudes at Cambridge opened Ahmed’s eyes to many ideals and principles such as “resolution,” “socialism,” “liberation struggles,” “class oppression,” and “the struggle against imperialism” (Ahmed 180, 210). These ideals altogether helped Ahmed to develop a better understanding of how to deal with the society in which she lived.

At Cambridge, Ahmed met Alan, an American graduate student who was studying American History at Cambridge, and they later married. She hoped that the marriage might help her find the home she aspired to, but the marriage only lasted a couple of years. Nonetheless, Ahmed spoke of her relation with Alan as a “piece of good fortune” (Ahmed 208). Alan’s support and warmth and his ability to laugh gave Ahmed a sense of “stability and connection” (Ahmed 209). Most importantly, Alan’s patterns of thinking had greatly influenced Ahmed’s thought processes. She realized how his liberal and secular ideology reflected positively on her. She describes how Alan felt happy...
when she told him about her religious belief regarding interfaith marriage in that she could not marry him unless he converts into Islam. He responded positively, considering converting into Islam no more than an adventure. Feeling the high level of liberalness and progressiveness made Ahmed think of the merits people might gain once they opt for religious freedom principles rather than dogmatic paradigms.

At Cambridge, many turning points took place in Ahmed’s life. Perhaps the most important one was her understanding of the term “racism.” Ahmed felt challenged by this term because she had the impression that she was no longer coming to England as a visitor but as someone who had no home. She was trying to understand this term so that she could adopt England as her new home. In other words, she would ignore any racist situation if she had come as a visitor, but living there as a resident had complicated her situation especially with the prevailing racial conditions at that time in England:

And England was in a different time in its history. Undergoing its first significant black immigration, England was for the first time dealing (somewhat hysterically) with the issue of color and race on home soil rather in the far flung colonies. Racism, consequently, was far more insistently and inescapably in the air now than it had been just a few years back…And then, too, there was the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, which unleashed in the press a deluge of frenetic, ignorant, biased and outright racist views of Arabs. (Ahmed 238)

Among these conditions, it was a must that Ahmed would confront racism. Previously, she, along with other Muslim students at Cambridge, never spoke of this term but they only spoke of an “overt racism.” (Ahmed 224). In other words, they had no previous real life scenes which they could call racism; all what they knew about racism was only some generic ideas, mistakenly thinking that racism in the West only targeted
black people. For her, this kind of racism only targeted the blacks and the working class at that time. Then, she realized that Arab and Muslim women had been targets of racism, even "civilized Cambridge did not regard us [Ahmed and the other Arab and Muslim students at Cambridge] as equals" (Ahmed 225). Below, Ahmed reports some of the racist attitudes she eye-witnessed:

A man spat at me on a bus once when, thinking I was Israeli, he discovered I was an Arab. And once at a College Feast at King’s College, where I had gone as someone’s guest, one of the young fellows of the college sitting at the head of our table told me that he was a staunch supporter of Anthony Eden and that the Suez canal should be in British hands—the Egyptians didn’t have the engineering capacities to keep the canal open. It would no doubt shortly clog up and the British would have to take over running it again. (Ahmed 189-90)

In addition to Ahmed’s awareness of some new terminology that helped her with her academic pursuit, she was able to develop a different perspective about women. She hints at how the educated people’s ambivalent reaction to women’s writing in Egypt and Girton encouraged her to pursue her academic career. While the men of official Arabic culture considered women’s written texts as "endless talks," as idle gossip (i.e., Harem women talks), people in Girton regarded that same activity practiced by women as "honorable, serious, and noble talk" (191-92). She also emphasized the significance of literary analysis and critique that followed the reading of fiction:

At Girton, on the other hand, it was fictional people, people in books and novels and plays, whose words and actions and motives and moral characters we analyzed endlessly...That same activity, essentially practiced at Alexandria and Zatoun orally and on living texts to sustain the life of the community, was called
by outsiders to the process—by men of the official Arabic culture and by Westerners, men and women—idle gossip... That same activity, however, practiced by the women of Girton on written, not oral texts, and on fictional, not living, people was regarded as honorable, serious, important work. (Ahmed 191-92)

Definitely, Ahmed’s interest in her academic field of women’s studies made her think of residing in countries like England that would appreciate her feminist aspirations and ideologies. In fact, this is the time when she felt the urgent need of finding an ideal home that would fulfill her academic and feminist ambitions. She acknowledged that Egypt could never be the right place for achieving her academic prospects.

Back and Forth Journeys

After the death of her father, Ahmed returned to Egypt, but, once again, it no longer felt like home to her. This realization spurred her subsequent travels, during which her beliefs about what “home” meant continued to change. In fact, Ahmed’s conception of the term “home” had slightly changed while she was in Britain. She looked at the term “home” from a different perspective. At this point, her general perception of the term had not been only limited to the physical structures and borders, family, people, or memories. It rather meant the home that equipped her with more intellect and mental power:

Of course this was "England," a place, with its red roofs and woods and fogs and rain... in my mind, through all those years of losing myself in English books. This was one reason, no doubt, that I took so easily to Girton and instantly felt at home. Another, of course, was that my brothers and sister had also been students at Cambridge and I’d grown up hearing them talk about it. Even the people who
were to be the key presences in my own life at Girton had been at Girton.
(Ahmed 180)

From the excerpt, she described her home of origin as being less important than the host home, England. Instead of defining “home” in terms of the national *Uruba*-based qualities she inherited at her childhood and that shaped her identity, she defined “home” as a source of intellectual power, comfort and happiness rather than geographical, physical, and artificial structures and designs. For Ahmed, home also meant familiarity of place and its beauty rather than the historical and traditional denotations. She, for example, adopted Girton as home because it looked familiar to her. This is simply because, as she mentioned, she began to extensively read English literary books throughout her school years at Cambridge, not only in the hope of educating herself but also to heal herself from the life traumas that inflected her at Cambridge. I argue that this realization marks the first of many ideas that would eventually lead Ahmed to develop what I term “a spiritual home” – a home not associated with an exterior place, but with an interior attitude.

Undoubtedly, Ahmed’s journeys from Egypt, to the UK, to Abu Dhabi, and finally to the US helped Ahmed to redefine what “home” meant, or rather that these journeys helped her develop a better understanding of what home should be like. Throughout her journeys Ahmed lived in different homes, and seemingly, she completely celebrated the places that adopted, empowered, and freed her. Similar to what postcolonial critics and writers theorized, host homes for Ahmed became “more lovely” than her home of origin (Ahmed 181). Girton, for example, intensely charmed Ahmed with “assumptions, beliefs, and ways of living that had hitherto framed the world as [she]
knew it.” So it was very normal that Ahmed regarded Girton a “home” (Ahmed 180-81). Ahmed makes this claim crystal-clear in the excerpt below. She writes,

Girton then, spectacularly more lovely, was this too, and *so naturally I felt at home*. (To this day, probably because of Girton, I love the English landscape around Cambridge as much as I love any landscape—even Egypt’s...One of the pleasures of finding myself in Cambridge again recently was that of living once more in a place where the look of the earth and trees and the shapes of leaves and the shadows they cast on the ground were deeply familiar—and of hearing again familiar birds, some of which I recognized from childhood in Cairo, birds going back and forth in their migrations between Europe and Africa). (Ahmed 181, emphasis added)

Once again, with such admiration for Girton, it sounded hard for Ahmed to stay in Egypt and/or to consider it home. She expressed her strong desire to leave Egypt as soon as she could. She just wanted “the engines to start up, [and] the plane to take off. I wanted to be out of Egypt” (Ahmed 206). Once more, Ahmed’s point of leaving home indicates that she celebrated her “new” home because it helped her to get rid of the “alienating experiences” (231) there and, in the meantime, enabled her to construct her identity in a world that would never denied her a “…passport, [and where] nobody was forcibly preventing [her] from pursuing the life [she] wanted to pursue” (Ahmed 208).

Although England had a positive effect on Ahmed in that it empowered and liberated her from patriarchal oppression, it seems that it was not the sort of ideal home Ahmed had aspired to construct and/or define. She criticized the realities of power and class practiced against women or illegal residents and immigrants:
For here, too, our lives were sustained, as we pursued our quest of meaning, ideas, truth, by a troupe of others, called not servants but gyps and staff and workers… and gardeners and assistants. These were words that professionalized and also sanitized and rendered psychologically and emotionally acceptable the realities of power and class. They were words that, while they allowed the comfortable classes of Western societies to be sustained by the labor and service of others, simultaneously allowed them…to feel self-righteous and to believe that they, unlike the backward, oppressive middle and upper classes of Third world societies, lived in classless, democratic societies and didn’t oppress people. (Ahmed 182)

In this excerpt, I underscore how Ahmed harshly criticized her class for oppressing women. In short, Ahmed wonders how advanced countries such as Britain who claim democracy and call for women’s equality insist on enslaving women and employing them as servants but with modern and professional names such as “agricultural workers” and “illegal immigrants” (182). She also hints how even some US leading feminist figures committed similar mistakes:

For Westerners, apparently, it’s okay and democratic to have servants…provided you use the right words and never call them that. Betty Friedan, for example, unabashedly recommends in the Feminine Mystique that the government subsidize university-educated women so that they can hire “household help”—of what color, I wonder, and what class in this classless society?—and thus be free to fulfill their artistic and intellectual potential. (Ahmed 182)

Clearly, England, Ahmed’s host home, functions like an intermediary space for her. It enlightened her life academically and culturally, but she was unable to construct
home through her marriage which ended very shortly. At this point, Ahmed's next move to the US makes me infer that England might not well be the "home" she was seeking to fulfill her for academic and cerebral ambitions. She decided that the US might be the home where she could freely think, act, and move forward:

In America I would be able to read and research freely and to acquire the tools and methods that women there were developing and using so brilliantly... America rather than England was a natural place now for me to think of, for all three of my siblings had settled there. All three had found that in Europe... they simply could not advance in their professions beyond a certain point. In America they told me, things were different. (291)

The United States: The Second Host Home

Once Ahmed settled in the United States, she dedicated herself to improving the lives of Arab women from a global perspective. This work was inspired, in part, by her feelings of being unable to claim anywhere as "home." Ahmed arrived in the United States in 1979, a year that formed a turning point in the American feminist movement because of the many internal disputes about matters of sexuality, diversity, and women of color. This same year also witnessed one of the most significant events that influenced the relationship between the US and the Islamic world due to the Iranian hostage crisis in which some Iranian students seized the American Embassy in Iran and took its staff as captives.11 Working with various women during her journeys, Ahmed came to the conclusion that the vast majority of Arab women were oppressed, marginalized, and silenced. As a result, she immersed herself in reading all recent scholarship pertaining to

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11 The major reason for seizing the American Embassy in Iran was because America allowed the deposed president, Shah, to enter America for medical treatment. For clarification, see http://www.historyguy.com/iran-us_hostage_crisis.html.
feminism and feminist issues, most of which was written by American activist feminists such as Kate Millet, Elaine Showalter, Patricia Spacks, Adrienne Rich, and Mary Daly.

At this point, Ahmed realized that studying feminism was more difficult than the study of literature that she had undertaken at Cambridge simply because feminism compelled her to work with theory. Although studying theory was a hard job for Ahmed, she benefited from this experience by correlating all the theories she studied to her own experience with diverse women, and accordingly she began to "examine, analyze, and think about the world of which [she] was a part in a way" (Ahmed 288).

However, Ahmed's first reaction to the US feminist movement was negative due to the gap of religion and origin, given her origin as a Muslim and an Arab. In her interactions with US feminists, she was confronted with some matters that impeded her way to approaching and comprehending American feminism. At the very beginning, she mistakenly viewed US feminism as "tranquil, lucid, [and] meditative" - the sort of first wave feminism that she encountered at Girton. Yet, she came to realize that the feminism of the 1960s - second wave feminism - was "[m]ilitant, vital, tempestuous, visionary, [and] turbulent." (Ahmed 291) She explained that she was hardly accepted the way she was among the educated circle of white women, Christians and Jewish. Definitely, the major point of conflict was about religion, a difference was always considered a stigma by those US feminists who held stereotypical views of Arab and Arab-American women's lives.

During academic gatherings, conferences, and other feminist activities, Ahmed expressed her dissatisfaction when she, among others, was not allowed to address, investigate and reflect on her heritage, tradition, and religion in a way similar to other white women. She, instead, was always confronted with questions which were offensive
yet “dismissive,” such as “[w]ell, what about the veil” or “what about cliterodectomy?” (Ahmed 292). In the excerpt below, Ahmed mentioned some of the critics who argued against the “racist gaze” white women employed when dealing with women of other cultures and races such as Audre Lorde, June Jordan, and bell hooks. Ahmed observed:

But as I would learn soon enough, the task of addressing racism for feminists of color in the West is, and has to be, an ongoing and central part of the work and the thinking that we ordinarily do, no less so than the work of addressing male dominance. And so my first experience of American feminism was a kind of initiation and baptism by fire into what has indeed been an ongoing part of my thought and work ever since. Back then, though, it was still early in our understanding of the racist gaze the white feminist movement turned on women of other cultures and races. (Ahmed 293)

Ahmed further explains some of the conditions that accompanied her as she began to engage in the American feminist movement. She realized that joining this kind of feminism had not been easy, especially for someone who came from a culture that was rich with its religious tradition. She realized that the movement which she previously conceived as an “activist social movement” had completely turned into a “predominantly intellectual, academic, and theoretical force” (Ahmed 294). It was hard for Ahmed then to easily acquire the ideology of American feminism because, as she pointed out, she had “no guides, no maps, [and] no books” (Ahmed 195). Ahmed’s confession of not being able to quickly master the theories of the living American feminism made her turn her efforts to studying the history of Arab and Muslim women. So, she dedicated part of her time looking into all the experiences she observed about the status of Arab women, taking advantage of the theoretical information she learned from the theories she learnt
while in England. She accordingly studied the history of Arab women and as she continued to settle in America, she ended up working for women’s rights.

Ahmed’s experience in the US as she attempted to help Arab and Muslim women made her come to a completely different perspective about defining and/or finding “home”. She believed that the US, too, might not be the sort of cerebral home that she imagined. She decided that her English and US host homes were not perfect places, but they offered an intermediary space in which she could work out her feelings of dislocation.

Ahmed’s Spiritual Home: The Imagined Intellectual Space

In order to feel truly self-actualized, Ahmed ended up developing an imagined ideological space that would inspire her, along other unrepresented women voices, to act. Since Ahmed employed herself as a voice for educationally and academically less fortunate Arab women, she was trying to generate a global perspective. She did not solely speak of her own culture and home, she rather spoke of all cultures where women of different colors, origins, and religions are expected to imagine/and or construct their homes. Below, Ahmed explains how her story had been part of other stories that she heard during her journeys, and which to a great extent represent all women she could reach in America:

For thereafter my life becomes part of other stories, American stories. It becomes part of the story of feminism in America, the story of women in America, the story of people of color in America, the story of Arabs in America, the story of Muslims in America, and part of the story of America itself and of American lives in a world of dissolving boundaries and vanishing borders. (296)
This excerpt shows that Ahmed links herself to a community of women whose stories had been and continued to be of great significance in her life. She was able to transform all stories of the women whom she worked with into theories – and it is through this work that Ahmed has developed a true sense of belonging and a spiritual home. Her intellectual work has included the goal of fighting against fundamental Islam in all its different shapes, especially as Ahmed believes that it is fundamental Islam that causes Arab and Muslim to become the subject of Western stereotyping and to lack the sort of self-actualization that she feels to be so important in the face of all types of authoritarian patriarchal culture. This vision has been dedicated to the help and support women who have been academically and economically less fortunate. Ahmed has advocated that all women should be able to develop a better understanding of themselves.

I want to underscore Ahmed’s statement “[I]’d begin to follow the path that would bring me – exactly here,” (Ahmed 5) – for while this quote refers to her new position at Harvard University as a professor of women’s studies, it also refers to the spiritual home that she has created for herself and that she suggests that other women create for themselves. By becoming a professor of Women’s studies in a US school, she proved that there is no conflict between being Muslim and adopting feminist ideology, contrary to what some American and Arab (Muslim) feminist had argued. This new way of thinking represented a major turning point in Ahmed’s life; it showed how her persona had undergone several life stages: a privileged child, a rebellious teenager, a divorced wife, and eventually a very powerful activist who stood up for the rights of Arab and Muslim women. Her book *Women and Gender in Islam* (1992) is in fact a testimony to her efforts in supporting women’s rights, fighting Islamist and patriarchal
hegemony, rejecting all kinds of oppression and male-domination, and, more importantly, counterattacking the thoughts and ideology of oppressive regimes. Ahmed’s development of a spiritual home – in this instance one that emanated from her intellectual pursuits, enabled her finally to feel at home.

Conclusion

In her memoir, Ahmed calls for an ideal world where women can live free from religious, social, and political restrictions. For her, women should not seek a special world that could separate them from the outside world; rather, like her, they should aspire for a world that would provide them with equal opportunities of life, voice, and freedom. Additionally, she calls for a fair representation of Arab and Muslim in political and cultural life, especially when they choose to live within the circle of Western women. She argues that these women had to be accepted the way they were, rather than the ideal way they should have been i.e., westernized and/or Americanized. Her belief is that those women had to be accepted despite their color, faith or ideology. In fact, none of the homes she visited accepted women as they were, especially when these women were labeled as Muslims and Arabs.

As it turned out, the United States – her last host home – provided Ahmed with a space that enabled her to construct the imagined intellectual space that could correspond to her different labels of identity, being an Arab, and an Egyptian Muslim woman. This kind of home celebrated Ahmed’s emotional and cultural perspectives, helping her adapt without the cultural displacements she experienced at her home of origin. It also enabled her to socialize with women who accepted and supported her in developing her ideology regarding fundamental Islam, and, most importantly, to find a community of women that
could provide her with intellectual stimulation and benefits of American and Western feminist movements:

- It was a sense of the enormous intellectual vitality and cultural richness of this city and a sense of an almost palpable vibrancy and ferment: this place that was (as it has been for millennia) a meeting place of so many histories, so many ways of thought, so many ways of belief. (Ahmed 300)

The imagined ideological space that Ahmed constructed enables her to justify her attitude towards her home of origin. This way of critiquing one’s home of origin serves two purposes. First, it helps to change the stereotypical representation of Arab and Middle Eastern women in the eyes of a Western audience in general and US feminists, in particular. Second, critiquing one’s home might also become a strong motive for Middle Eastern and Arab-American women to construct, find, or imagine ideological spaces that would eventually challenge their authoritarian patriarchal culture. By so doing, Ahmed helps unveil all the misunderstandings pertaining to her culture and home, a move that will eventually create a sense of more trust and understanding among the Western audience and/or readers.

Last but not least, there are other Arab-American women authors who followed in the steps of Ahmed by searching for their identities and trying to find other homes outside the borders of their homes of origin. However, these authors might belong to different cultures, religions, and origins. Zainab Salbi is an Iraqi-American memoirist who, in her memoir *Between Two Worlds*, goes on a similar journey and ends up developing her own spiritual home. Instead of adopting a highly philosophical and theoretically driven world view as Ahmed does, Salbi comes up with a more practical
definition of a spiritual home, thus aiming at turning ideas and philosophies into real-life practices, as I describe in the next chapter.
Overview

To continue my discussion of the relationship between Arab-American women memoirists and the concept of home, I have chosen to focus on Zainab Salbi’s *Between Two Worlds*. This memoir, as is the case with other Arab-American texts that were written in the aftermath of September 11th attacks, is abundant with themes that celebrate stories of success amidst political chaos. Following in the steps of her Arab-American women counterparts, Salbi’s *Between Two Worlds* addresses identity conflict and the search for home.

I have chosen Salbi’s memoir because of the thematic debates and heated subjects it addresses regarding the regime of Saddam Hussein and the plight of Iraqi citizens both before and after the Iraq War. Salbi’s book is a good resource that provides facts regarding life under Saddam Hussein, especially in terms of politics, history, religion, and social systems. It also addresses very critical yet sensitive topics and sub-topics that correspond to the religious and political experiences of the author/protagonist and her family. A shared thread between Satrapi, Ahmed, and Salbi’s journeys is that these memoirists belonged to middle-class families, which were trapped in “gilded cages” as Courtney Brkic commented on Ahmed’s journey (n.pag). Additionally, these memoirists succeeded in turning themselves from alienated victims into powerful and effective feminist figures.
I have also chosen this text because it implies a message of challenge; Salbi, who writes from feminist perspective, challenges and/or calls for other women to break their silence. Salbi authors a post September 11th text that shows how Arab-American women authors can rebel, act, and create true change instead of keeping their works limited to the theoretical realm.

About the Memoir

*Between Two Worlds* concerns Salbi’s dramatic “escape” from Baghdad in the late 1980s into an arranged marriage, and then to refugee status in the United States where she founded an international organization for war-survivors and rape victims (Bashir and Sigurd 305). Salbi’s memoir details all the events of her life as she forges her own identity; it summarizes her life stages as a child, a teenager, and an adult. As Amy Tiemann observes, Salbi has created an “emotional, beautifully-written, timely and relevant memoir [by] weaving her family’s story with women’s history and Iraq’s political history” (n.pag.).

Throughout these life stages, Salbi seems incapable of either adopting or adapting to the tyrannical and repressive life standards in which women, including herself and her mother, found themselves living under Saddam Hussein. Ironically, unlike the majority of Iraqi children, she was born into a life of financial ease. She could have taken advantage of the privileged life she lived by becoming a replica of her mother, whose need for wealth forced her to be silent and submissive just to remain on Saddam Hussein’s good side. Instead, Salbi decided to break her silence and to liberate herself.

In Baghdad, Salbi was eleven when her father was appointed as Hussein’s personal airline pilot. This new position helped with strengthening her family’s relationship with Hussein’s family, allowing for more mutual home visits. By getting to
know Hussein well and getting to observe him up close, Salbi’s privileged position subsequently facilitated her ability to write about Hussein and to provide the readers of her memoir with more accurate details. Due to the lack of credible resources about Hussein’s life, which according to many critics has been described so vaguely, Salbi’s memoir has been considered a useful resource because it reveals some of the mysterious facts surrounding Hussein’s controversial character. This access to Hussein has given Salbi’s memoir more credibility and reliability because she has been able to document Hussein’s real-life experiences as she eye-witnessed them, not as she heard or read about them. In her “visual memoir,” Salbi describes her days of tyranny under Hussein which ended with her escape to the US and into an arranged marriage to an Iraqi-American who ended up being more abusive than Hussein. She acknowledges that she wrote her memoir through the eyes of a privileged child, a rebellious teenager, a violated wife, and ultimately a public figure fighting to overcome “silence” that plagued her during her childhood and teenaged years (Salbi and Becklund n. pag.).

The idea for Between Two Worlds came from a meeting between Zainab Salbi and US journalist Laurie Becklund. As Salbi was delivering a speech about the work of women journalists in 2002, she met with Becklund who had previously written a newspaper story about Salbi in the Los Angeles Time during the first Gulf War. Below Salbi reports the entire story:

Laurie covered Iraqi Americans during the first Gulf war and had met me at a press conference held by the Iraqi-American community in Los Angeles. She noticed a young woman who was constantly crying on the sidelines. She wrote a story about how I had been stranded in America while I didn’t know whether my family was dead or alive in Iraq. That was the first of several stories in the Los
Angeles Times, and led to a series of interviews I did on U.S and international television networks about life in Iraq...

...

Days and months passed, and another war with Iraq was launched. Saddam was overthrown this time, and I decided to write a book about women in Iraq, as I felt very little was known about Iraqi women. I called Laurie and asked her to write the book with me. I didn’t think twice about it. I knew that was the reason why I met her two years earlier. (Salbi 288-89)

Salbi, with the help of Becklund, published Between Two Worlds in 2005. In it, she documented her personal experience, thoughts and ideology, her reaction to living for so long in close proximity to Saddam Hussein, and her traumatic experiences that occurred during her “escape” journey to the US in an attempt to create a life away from the threats posed by Hussein’s growing interest in her as a sexual object.

When Salbi first thought of writing her own story, she did not intend it to be a memoir because she felt that she had not suffered as much as other Iraqi women, given that she had grown up in a privileged environment. She wanted to document the experience of Iraqi women who suffered greatly under Saddam Hussein, and she thought that her own story was of lesser importance. Most importantly, she was worried that she would be critiqued as someone hoping to gain extra privileges by sharing her own story with the Western world. However, she realized later that she had to “take ownership” of her story, especially after listening to the stories of other threatened, abused, and raped women whom she was trying to help as founder of Women for Women International.

12 This “co-authored” work is completely different from other works which celebrities normally do when they come to write their personal stories. The thoughts, ideas, and subject matter in the memoir all belonged to Salbi, but Becklund helped with topics which were heartbreaking for Salbi.
Salbi recognized their courage and therefore she felt that it was her turn to tell her own story and speak up:

Who was I to write a memoir? I thought to myself...When I was asked to focus the book more on my story, I resisted vehemently. I cried, I screamed, I kicked, I wanted to do anything but write my own story. I was afraid that my story had no legitimacy. I didn’t want to be yet another privileged person able to share my perspectives with the world. I saw myself as a mere messenger, telling the stories of other women, in my work with Women for Women International...And yet, in the end there was a point at which I felt that I had to take ownership of my voice, my truth, and my story. (Salbi 289-90)

Salbi’s decision to share her story also enabled her to write about the establishment of Women for Women International, which she announced in this memoir. She not only tried to hear the voices of the oppressed and victimized women, but she also spared no effort to help these women both socially and financially. As part of her job as a chairperson of the Women for Women International, she met with thousands of women who survived wars all over the world and helped them to rebuild their lives by providing them with hope and financial support.

Salbi sought to write her personal experience in a memoir form because she came to feel that a memoir provided the best means for telling the truth and for taking ownership of her voice. Drawing upon the same theme, critic Tzvi Howard Adelman argues that memoirists are normally apt to write their memoirs and/or autobiographical writings when they want to express a sort of “conversion experience” and “radical change in self-orientation” (qtd. in Harris 141). Like Adelman, I argue that Salbi’s memoir was
originally intended to create radical change in Salbi's life and in the lives of other women, especially those who shared traumatic experiences in war torn regions.

Structure and Reception of *Between Two Worlds*

The political and social environment in which Salbi wrote her memoir was challenging. She, along with her family, was very close to Saddam Hussein because of her father's position as Hussein's private pilot. Salbi was not impressed by the privileges given to her family by Hussein, and she was critical of the whole relationship. It was really challenging for Salbi to write her memoir as a rejection of the political and social practices of Hussein, although most of the privileges she and family enjoyed were derived from their close family ties to Hussein. It should be pointed out that the character of Hussein was complex. People who did not socialize with him might not be able to understand his true personality, so there were many Iraqi people who considered him a hero. In this context, it was a big risk for Salbi to write a memoir in which she divulged all the unjust practices of Hussein and his family. However, Salbi decided to write her memoir regardless of Iraqi readers' opinions of Hussein. She also knew that Western readers might be offended by the fact that she and her family were so close to Saddam Hussein; however, she hoped that by depicting how vicious he was to her family that she would gain credibility with Western readers.

As she came to structure her memoir, Salbi juxtaposed her chapters with some excerpts taken from her mother’s diaries, a segment she called “From Alia’s Notebook,” in which Salbi’s mother described in depth the oppressive character of Hussein, his speeches, his unannounced visits, and his stories which he used to tell about his poor childhood and his heroic deeds and adventures. Actually, this choice of her mother’s memories added more reliability to the context of the story because Alia, Salbi’s mother,
interacted frequently with Hussein and therefore she could better tell more about him. This kind of structuring technique was also designed to add credibility to Salbi’s memoir, compelling Western readers to be more sympathetic with Salbi, even though she and her mother were close to Hussein. Here, it should be remembered that Salbi has changed the names of most of the people in her narrative, with the exception of her immediate family members and of Hussein’s family members. This fact is particularly significant to understand when Salbi introduces the reader to her first husband, Fakhri, as the name she chooses has some sarcastic connotations. In the Arabic culture, the name Fakhri translates into dignity and pride, two features that he lacked.

Salbi’s memoir had a unique reception among American and Arab-American communities. It provided a living example of a woman who wrote against the prevailing image of Arab and Muslim women living in America. Alice Walker, for example, indicated that Salbi’s memoir provided information about Iraq during Hussein’s reign which was considered more significant than what historical books and media provided (Salbi and Becklund n.pag.).

Undoubtedly, Salbi titles her book Between Two Worlds to emphasize her experience in the world of Saddam Hussein and the world of oppressed and silenced women. It also, as Sadiq Alkoriji mentions in his review, aims to “document her privileged yet harrowing life in her native Iraq, recounting her memories of family” (Salbi and Becklund n.pag.). Most reviewers of Salbi’s text agree that her memoir comes as response to the state of oppression women experienced under Hussein’s stronghold of Iraq.

Salbi additionally hoped that this book might help her become a voice for women who were survivors of war-torn regions, including those who had been raped or

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physically assaulted. In other words, she wanted to publish her story to other women so that they might benefit from her experience and break their own silence. In the memoir, Salbi writes in detail about her traumatic personal experience, as both a war and rape survivor and she points to the tyranny she, among other women, experienced at the hands of Hussein and his sons. Women were treated as tools to entertain and praise Hussein and his family. She hoped that her personal experience could be generalized to include all women who had been subject to natural catastrophes, wars, and human injustices. She also hoped that she could help other war survivors and oppressed women by rebuilding a better future and communities where these women could live safely and where they could break their silence:

Would women once again fall beneath the radar screen of history, which preferred to measure war in terms of incident reports and expenditures and kilotons and battles and causalities? How long would women continue to be complicit in their suffering by remaining silent? (Salbi 5)

As a young woman, unable to take any act or speak her mind, Salbi came to the conclusion that escape was better than living a life of submissive, humiliating silence. While her family was socializing with the Hussein’s family, she was unable to stand the hypocrisy she observed at those familial gatherings, as her family and friends bowed to Hussein’s every wish and were constantly afraid for their lives. As an observer and participant, she always felt powerless and unable to express her honest opinions. Perhaps this might be one reading of her statements when she claimed that “I wanted to make myself whole again. I wanted to come clean. I wanted to do my job without feeling like a hypocrite” (Salbi 5). Here, she felt fragmented, suppressed, and defenseless as she saw Hussein’s family acting in arrogant yet stupid ways. Her entire family felt devalued and
depreciated when, for example, they were forced to watch Saddam’s flaunting of his extramarital affair (Salbi 110). Below Salbi expands on some of the incidents she witnessed when she was unable to speak up:

That weekend was one of the few times I spent time with his mistress, Samira. Chairs had been arranged in a large circle for us on the lawn after dinner and each of us had a servant in full military uniform standing behind us in case we needed anything. Amo [a nick name that all girls in Iraq had to use when talk to Saddam Hussein] was in a jovial mood that night with Samira at his side. She was laughing and fawning over him, throwing her relationship with him in my parents’ faces. Behind their facade of courtesy, I could see disgust on the faces of all the adults. Samira flirted with him endlessly as we watched, reveling in her superiority over this supposedly elite circle as she whispered in his ear and ran her fingers along his thigh. Forced to witness this overtly sexual interplay, I thought about what it must be like to be her sons who were there watching it all. (Salbi 110)

This scene, as can be understood from Salbi’s discourse, can be read as an attempt to show the agency and superiority employed over the women of the elite class, a feeling that inspired Salbi to break her silence and escape. In the Arabic culture, acting in this manner in front of a public audience is considered disrespectful and discourteous. This is simply because it might arouse the jealousy of Alia, Salbi’s mother, and her husband who would not be courageous enough to act in a similar way. This incident, from a post-colonial perspective, represents the colonized self that existed in Salbi who seemed “unable to get up [and] unable to speak,” a feature that she inherited from her mother who always wanted her daughter to act submissively.
Salbi accordingly felt completely uncomfortable with her mother’s reaction towards Hussein and especially towards his sexually predatory nature. When Salbi recognized she herself and her mother had been equally vulnerable to Hussein’s sexual desires, she began to resent her mother. She assumed that instead of living in the space which Hussein created for her, her mother could have broken her silence and rebelled against her oppressive and submissive life. She abhorred her mother’s idea of “escape” – an attempted suicide – as being cowardly. That is why she blamed her mother when she realized that she wanted to commit suicide by swallowing pills just to escape from Hussein. The feeling of hopelessness and despair which Salbi observed on her mother’s face made her wish to erase her mother from her memory (Salbi 50). In such climate Salbi came to the conclusion that escape might, anyway, be a better option than living in the state of weakness that her mother reached. In the hope of creating a safe home in the United States, she accepted her mother’s suggestion that she marries an older Iraqi-American Fakhri, who was an antagonist to Hussein, despite her father’s disapproval of the marriage. Salbi recounts a conversation between her parents regarding the proposed marriage:

“This is wrong, Alia” my father shouted angrily over the sound of traffic. “We cannot let this marriage proceed. We cannot do this to her!”

“I am not taking her back to Iraq!” my mother said, and burst into tears. “This is her chance at a future. This marriage must go through. I will not allow her to go back to Iraq! I am not taking her back there!” (Salbi 172)

Despite her father’s apprehension, Salbi chose to take responsibility of her own marriage and decided to let the marriage proceed. As I will detail below, Salbi’s escape ends ups being just as much of a trial as her experience in Iraq. However, one of the
reasons that made Salbi’s memoir attract attention in the West is that she was able to turn her “escape” into “true change.” She eloquently succeeded in changing her state of “silence,” and “indecisiveness” into steadiness and motivation despite her humiliating experience of marriage. Although the term “escape” literally meant fleeing from a difficult past, Salbi proved that she was capable of transforming that “darkness” into “crystal” inside her by “breaking silence” and becoming a voice for all oppressed, raped, and ignored women. She urged other women to break their silence, too (Watterson n.pag.). Unlike other Iraqi women who in the aftermath of the Gulf War were only waiting, of course in vain, for change to come, Salbi decided to rebel and break her silence in her own way rather than waiting for the political and magical promises that would give them an a better role in public and politics.

This chapter will respond to the following questions: How did Salbi envision the homes she visited and/or revisited? What kind of homes did she value most? Why did she have conflict with her “home of origin,” especially in terms of her identity? What were some of the plights, impediments, and hardships that confronted Salbi in Iraq and America? Did she, like Ahmed, succeed in forging a feminist identity despite living in an escalating colonial climate? However, prior to delving in responding to these questions, I need to explain the historical context of Salbi’s memoir.

Historical Context

Salbi’s memoir takes place during a very pivotal era in Iraqi history under the former Iraqi president Saddam Hussein with whom the Salbis had strong familial connections. From his early childhood in Tikrit, his home of origin, Hussein, despite his “poverty-ridden and troubled childhood,” was obsessed with politics (Karsh and Rautsi 6). He was an orphan and because his mother Sabha was not rich, he was adopted by his
uncle Khairallah Talfah, who inspired him to political activism and taught him to “scheme and manipulate so as to survive” (12).

In 1957 when Hussein was at the age of 20, he joined the Ba'ath Party. But he had a low rank in that Party, especially when he left Iraq to Egypt to continue his education. However, he began to build up a better position in the Party by joining the group headed by his “blood relative” Brigadier Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr. In 1959, Saddam Hussein, among a group of Ba’th activists, attacked Abd al-Karim Qassem, the Iraqi president at that time who was on his way from his office, and shot him, but he did not die. Hussein, in effect, became one of the most wanted men in the country after he had been completely neglected. In 1963 a group of Nasserite and Ba'hist free Iraqi officers brought down the government of Qasim, and Hussein, along with al-Bakr ruled Iraq until al-Bakr, officially resigned in July 16th 1979 when Hussein was elected as the official president of Iraq (Karsh and Rautsi 17).

Karsh and Rautsi explain how Hussein started to gain the love of his people by socializing with them, disseminating his own huge portraits and pictures in the country, walking in public, asking about their people’s own matters, and paying them home visits. These social habits made Hussein establish a very intimate relation with his people and therefore made it easy for him to attract as many people as he could to his side (16-19). As Karsh and Rautsi note, Hussein learned this technique of survival from his uncle who taught him how to become a manipulator. Realizing the true self of Hussein by living very close by to him, the Salbis tried their best to distance themselves from Hussein, but they were eventually drawn in.

A major event Salbi deliberately elaborates on in her memoir is the Iran-Iraq War in 1980 which added to the Salbis’ concerns, especially for Alia, Salbi’s mother. In this
war, Iraq invaded Iran ostensibly because of border conflicts. As Salbi clarifies in her memoir, Hussein attempted to cease the spread of the Iranian Islamic revolution into Iraq, or in other words he was concerned about the spread of the Shiism in Iraq, thus changing the country from a Sunni dominant country into a Shia majority. The war lasted until the year 1989, when both sides endorsed a treatment of ceasefire based on a “US-sponsored resolution” (Global security.org n.pag.).

This war had many negative impacts on Shia people living in Iraq in general and on the Salbis in particular. The Salbis felt much more threatened than before because Salbi’s mother, Alia, had a Shi'i religious background. As Salbi recounts:

Because our enemy’s government was run by Shia clerics, all things Shia began to feel suspect. Karbala itself seemed to fall under suspicion, so my mother and her siblings moved Bibi [Alia’s mother] to Baghdad and instructed me to erase from my mind the fact that Bibi had once known Khomeini. (Salbi 35)

Definitely, Hussein tried to strengthen his hold on the Salbis, among others, so he enacted the law of forcing men to divorce their wives if they were of Iranian origin, and deporting them to Iran, another act of fueling “anti-Iranian sentiment” and practicing his agency over his opponents, forcing them to submit to his desires (Salbi 35). Hussein’s decision not to deport Alia, Salbi’s mother, is one example that made her parents feel compelled to remain in Hussein’s inner circle. Still, deep within, Salbi’s parents never felt comfortable with becoming part of his entourage. Salbi describes her parents’ reaction when they meet Hussein in familial meetings: “What I remember most from these gatherings, actually, is my parents’ faces. Both of them looked nervous and helpless to me, and I understood immediately why they were so determined that we never mention Amo’s name or describe ourselves as his friends” (Salbi 81).
Another factor that resulted from the Iraq-Iran War was the notion of religious extremism which the regime employed as a weapon to create division between the same people by promoting conflicting religious sects in the country, such as Shia vs. Sunni conflicts. The excerpt below explains the difference between the Shia and the Sunni:  

Sunnis are the followers of the Sunni division of the Islamic religion. Sunnis belong to the larger of the two major divisions of Islam. The other major division is called Shiʿah, and its followers are called Shiʿites. Sunnis make up more than 80 percent of the Muslims (followers of Islam) in the world, and they live everywhere Islam has spread. This name comes from the Sunnis' claim that they follow the Sunnah (example) of Muhammad, the prophet of Islam. 

... 

The Sunnis and Shiʿites differ little in their basic beliefs about God, prophecy, revelation, and the Last Judgment. But throughout Islamic history there has been hostility between the two groups that has often led to persecution and repression of one by the other. 

The issue that most sharply divides the Sunnis from the Shiʿites is the leadership of the religious community. When Muhammad died in A.D. 632, he named no one to succeed him and did not establish any method for choosing a new leader. The majority, which became the Sunnis, united behind Abu Bakr, one of Muhammad's prominent disciples, and acclaimed him as caliph (leader or successor). A smaller group, which became the Shiʿites, rejected Abu Bakr and the two caliphs who succeeded him. They argued that Muhammad had designated

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13 The terms Shia and Sunni have no specific consistent spelling. Different encyclopedias write them differently.
his son-in-law, Alī Ibin Abi Tālib, as leader, and that leadership should have remained in the family of Muhammad (Adamsn.pag.).

It is known that the majority of Muslims in Iran, where Salbi’s grandmother grew up, are Shiʿites, whereas the majority of Muslims in Iraq belong to Sunni background, a pretext that Hussein took advantage of and used to discriminate against all Iranians of Shiʿite origins claiming their religious bigotry. Salbi was accused of belonging to Iranian origins because of her maternal grandfather, who was of Iranian ancestry. She and her family were considered as belonging to the enemies, *al furs Al Majoos*, “fire worshiping Persians.” In other words, she lived in an era that revived ethnic and regional hatred (32). At this time, Hussein, as the war broke out, decided to revive all historical animosities claiming that it was a strategic plan to protect the country.

The political environment in which Salbi lived as a girl had a great impact on reshaping her new identity and patterns of thinking. Having witnessed the Iran-Iraq War, Salbi shed light on how women, in particular war survivors, suffered. The atrocities endured by these women motivated Salbi to make a difference through her writing career and educate the world about the events that had occurred. Salbi also took the initiative physically, financially, and emotionally to support women in need, as a counterpart to those academic activists, such as Ahmed, who might focus on theory, but not put theory into practice.

In spite of the chaotic political and religious environment, Salbi lived very privileged life. As most critics and scholars point out, Salbi belonged to the upper middle class, or according to Brkic, she belonged to the “gilded cage” people. Her friends, her schooling, and her way of dressing were evidence of her high social rank. She explained that at school she used to wear uniforms imported from Germany or England, whereas
her classmates would normally get theirs locally (56). Also, her family used to throw very extravagant parties: “[At] our house,” she states, “…drinks were passed to men and women who mingled easily over the sounds of Western and Arabic music and plates of fresh pistachios, almonds, and pomegranate seeds.” Another example is when one of her classmates told Salbi, “[y]ou don’t even know how to pray, you rich girl!” “You’re from the ooh-la-la class” (Salbi 57). However, Salbi was able neither to get herself involved in the same atmosphere of her parents nor to live up to the standards [her] mother had set” (Salbi 11).

As the title of the memoir clearly indicates, Salbi’s early childhood was spoiled by her *Amo,* “Uncle Saddam,” a nickname that all girls and women in Iraq had to use when talking to Hussein. She found herself, along with her family, trapped in “Hussein’s inner circle” (Tiemann, n.pag.) and/or his “extended circle” (Zvirin 272). She and her family found themselves obliged to join all the extravagant parties thrown by the leader and attended by his sons” (Zvirin 272). Zvirin explains that by naively enjoying these “perks,” Salbi would eventually realize that the “socioeconomic privilege came at extraordinary personal cost” (272). Working as Hussein’s private pilot forced “…Salbi’s father to be complicit in the regime’s many wrongs, despite being a decent man,” thus creating a situation where it became impossible for the entire family to distance themselves from Hussein’s domination (*Contemporary Authors Online,* n.pag.). At this point, Salbi’s mother felt the threat that surrounded her daughter whom she noticed was living exactly the same experience with Hussein, which she hoped to end by sending her daughter abroad.

In addition to the historical context, it is important to elaborate on the colonial context in which Salbi came to write her memoir. It is not very unusual that intellectual
figures such as Salbi become victims of colonial ambitions and aspirations which eventually would leave them grappling with hyphenated and lost identities. In this study, I am assuming that the political regimes as well as the patriarchal authorities belong to the colonial powers. David Richards explains how colonialism “...strikes[s] much more deeply into the social and individual psychology of the colonized” (11). He further explains how traumatically regimes react to people, as they try to corner them in the narrow angle of “otherness” by “substantiating a society’s ‘corporeal schema’...with an image of alienation and domination where [the regime] looks at the world and sees only a reflection of imperial power...” (Richards 11).

Richards argues that regimes and colonial powers act to stop the creation of any “workable forms of social and cultural life” by simply forcing new patterns of “psychological dependence” that aim at inflicting people’s lives with more dominion and inferiority (11). Similarly, in his Black Skin, White Masks, Frantz Fanon comments on the how colonialism epitomized by patriarchy and political regimes might well have psychological and physical adverse effects on inferior individuals and colonized subjects. Fanon details how colonized subjects’ identities are forcefully attacked by a colonial “neurotic orientation” (60), or what Richards refers to as a “…form of mental illness” (Fanon, “Black Skin” 11). Fanon explains that as a result of any action taken by the political system and/or the patriarchal authority, the individual and/or the colonized would engulf himself or herself in a complete state of nervousness and instability. By so doing, he or she would always be vulnerable to continuous attempts to flee and “annihilate” him or herself (Fanon, “Black Skin” 60).
Salbi’s Conflict with her Home of Origin

It is apparent that there are many similarities between Ahmed and Salbi especially when it comes to their writing stance, their education, and their childhood. Like Ahmed, Salbi sought to write from a different perspective than that of most members of her social class. She could have valued aspects of aristocratic and stylish life which she and her family enjoyed under Hussein, as the majority of her family’s friends did. However, she decided to write from a different standpoint; she wrote from a feminist stance in which she aimed at breaking her silence. Additionally, Ahmed and Salbi never stopped supporting women’s causes, even when the privileges they used to enjoy came to an end – this was especially the case for Salbi, who went from living a life of luxury to being effectively homeless after the end of her first marriage.

Importantly, the greatest similarity between Ahmed and Salbi was their perspective regarding their homes of origin. They showed great love and emotion for their homes of origin, but they never spoke of them as the homes which they always aspired to live in and/or fulfill their dreams. Although both memoirists experienced some identity conflicts due to crossing borders “here” and “there,” they acknowledged that their homes of origin could never be considered homes again, and therefore they decided to flee them (Majaj 5).

Like Ahmed, Salbi spends a significant portion of her memoir describing her conflicts with her home of origin; in fact, she compares herself under Hussein’s regime to an imprisoned bird. Whenever she and her mother would drive past the statue of Abbas Ibn Fernas in Baghdad,14 Salbi recounted that “I looked up at that statue [of Ibn Fernas]

14A true story of a person who was imprisoned in a high jail and tried to escape from jail by making wings for him, but after making the wings, he fell off and died. She seems obsessed with the statue because, for her, it is a reminder of freedom.
and tried to imagine what it would feel like to be a bird with wings flapping quietly, surely around me, and pillows of air under my arms” (Salbi 76).

However, I think the way Abdelrazek explains the notion of the home of origin is worth looking at. Abdelrazek explains that the home of origin cannot be reclaimed because it could not be banished in the host home. Initially, both memoirists consider their homes of origin as their only source of power. Like Salbi, although Ahmed was fully detached from her home when her parents passed away, she kept on referring to her home of origin as a source of intuition, inspiration, and empowerment. Similarly, although Salbi hated the physical structure of her place of living, she did not hate the spirituality that the place provided, thus always keeping her emotionally connected to home. So like Ahmed, Salbi expresses her love for her home despite her feelings of anguish and estrangement. She mentions, “...Iraq was my home. I loved Baghdad...There were too many good memories, despite Amo” (Salbi 94).

One of the central aspects of Salbi’s home life was the discord between her parents, caused by the stress that both of them were under because of Hussein’s interference in their personal lives. Salbi’s father was forced to witness and to participate in some of Hussein’s violent acts, and her mother was forced to be one of Hussein’s mistresses. Chérif’s perception of home as “deceptive intangible phenomenon” might well apply to Salbi’s case (211). Overall, critics agree that it is barely possible to create an identity and, in the meantime, find a true home within the scope of dysfunctional families. Hutchings and Weir stress the significance of family in providing the “basis for a (social network)” (qtd. in Bradly et al 25). Bradly et al. also show how the family “creates a network that provides assistance in times of need or trouble and, as Gorrill adds, it “regulates its member’s political, religious and economical activities and
establishes all rights and obligations" (25). However, because of the constant stress present in Salbi’s home, her ability to feel comfortable there was compromised.

Thus, despite the “golden cage” in which Salbi lived, she underscored that her life at her home of origin was nothing but a life in prison especially after “the rise of the dictatorship” (Salbi 93). She begged God to release her from that prison (Salbi 132). There, her true memories, family gatherings, and childhood activities had come to an end, and not only did she have to face her parents’ misery, she also came to the attention of Hussein and his sons as a possible rape victim. Eventually, Salbi only found solace in dreams of escaping the place, the family, the people, and her past.

In fact, the point at which Salbi reached her limit of tolerance was when she realized that Hussein looked “very much at home in our house-more so at the moment than my father did” (Salbi 66). The confusion raised by the image continued into her adult life. In the excerpt below Salbi shows how she was increasingly becoming the target of Hussein:

Amo was the only one who seemed relaxed. Fastidiously groomed and impeccably aware of every person and every movement around him, he had an enormous charisma that it is hard to convey if you never met him in person...May be like the best politicians, he just had that knack for making people, including children, feel they were being singled out for special attention. When he looked at you, it was as if he were really listening. *It took me a while to realize that when he gave you his most affectionate, lingering smile, he was using that time to look behind your eyes.* (Salbi 80, emphasis added)

And later she adds, “...weekends were Amo’s designated downtime, and we were his entertainment. Part of our job was to make him laugh at the right moment” (Salbi 81).
From these excerpts, readers can feel the confusion, fear, and dissatisfaction that Salbi hid deep within regarding her family’s relationship with Hussein simply because that relationship was not based on mutual friendship; it was an enforced, one-sided situation. She describes how the family did not have any privacy at all; all their time was booked for Hussein and his family. She clearly states that even at times when her family were supposed to relax and gather, they would be visited by Hussein.

Readers might further notice other complexities attached to Salbi’s depiction of her home of origin. For her, it became a symbol of “submission.” Salbi interpreted her mother’s attempt to commit suicide as the only means to release her out of her imprisonment at the “parental home,” depicting death and suicide as means of liberty. In another metaphorical image, she points out that the grave could be the safest place for women who decide to remain at their homes of origin. When, for example, she narrates the death of her grandmother, Bibi, in 1986, she concluded that the grave that hugged Bibi turned out to become her tent “under which [she] found shelter” (Salbi 120). In short, Salbi did not want to become trapped, like her mother, in an authoritarian patriarchal culture that might expose her to rape at any time. Her home of origin, in other words, had been despoiled by Hussein’s regime and accordingly it could never be her true home.

Salbi’s Failure to Construct an Identity in her Home of Origin

Undoubtedly, for Salbi the fact that she had to flee her home of origin impacted her ability to form a stable identity, a point that Ahmed also suffered from during her late teens. Salbi elaborates on the psychological and emotional pain that plagued her because of losing track of her national, historical, social, and religious identity. Eisenburch, while commenting on immigrants’ loss of identity, observes that the loss of one’s identity
and/or the “social structure” that connected him or her to home could cause grief to people who might have endured similar experiences (qtd. in Bhugra and Becker 19).

Repeatedly in her memoir, Salbi declares that life in Iraq had appropriated her identity, a feeling that encouraged her to search for her lost sense of self. Most importantly, Salbi suffered from an inability to speak to anyone about the repressive situation under which she and her family lived. Silence, according to Salbi, is dangerous in that it impedes people’s search for their identities. She also points at the dangers that accompany silence, namely submission. During her late teens, Salbi began to wonder at how she was not even allowed to think of the miserable living conditions because: “[t]hinking was dangerous, so I learned not to think or form an opinion. I learned to numb myself with novels and forced sleep and mental tricks. As for my emotions, they got checked into storage like so much baggage I would have to pay to claim later” (Salbi 119).

The excerpt above explains how Salbi had become fully insensitive and numb; how her quest for identity had been paralyzed. Salbi was forced to search for alternatives as she realized that her identity could not be stable as long as she mingled with Hussein’s family, who only employed her and her parents as “clowns” to amuse and entertain them. Below, I provide two examples that support my argument about Salbi’s conflict with her identity. In her teens, Salbi grapples with what she sees as two competing identities: one suggested by her name and one suggested by her familial affiliation.

Salbi devotes a substantial segment of her memoir to commentary on her given name, especially as it marked her Shia background and attached her in other people’s minds to the “historical Zainab.” This name, with its multiple religious and historical connotations, had disjointed Salbi from her own self. This disjointedness also reflects on the state of disconnection between herself, as an individual, and the society in which she
lived, as a whole. Edward Deluzain considers the correlation between name and identity a “form of symbolic contract between the society and the individual,” meaning that through the name, the individual becomes a part of the history of the society to which he or she belongs (n.pag.). Deluzain’s interpretation shows that once people accept their name, then these names would be attached to their own identities; however, if they wanted to abandon their name, it would mean that they wished to abandon their identities.

In this context, by referring to herself on occasion in the third person as ‘Zainab’ and on other occasions in the first person as ‘I,’ Salbi mirrored a “double split identity rather than a potent agent capable of self-creation” (Fjellestad 207).

This feeling of duality and inability to visualize her own self clearly may have created a form of disengagement between her “public self [and her] sense of an inner (unnamed) self” (Fjellestad 208) and also between her own self and the society, Deluzain argues. The moment Salbi started to recognize the significance and meaning of her name in maintaining her identity, she realized that this privilege was being usurped. That she was named ‘Zainab’ gave the impression that she had been named after the “historical Zainab” and that her identity was only attached to that historical and religious figure (Salbi 37). In other words, she felt disjointed from her name which, supposedly, should represent her identity.

In Iraq, it became customary that whoever had been named ‘Zainab’ would be Shia, thus creating a more complicated sense of religious bigotries, rather than of religious tolerance. In fact, Salbi liked the spiritual and religious sense attached to the “historical Zainab,” but apparently, she did not like to be named Zainab because she did not want her identity to be labeled in that religiously bigoted circle:
I had always admired that historical Zainab. It was because of her that we celebrated Ashura, the night Shia commemorate the massacre of Ali’s sons with public acts of charity and mournful ceremonies retelling the massacre. In some areas Shia men flog themselves in symbolic penance for their ancestors who failed to prevent the murder of the prophet heirs that night.

Then she added,

[...But] I was a preteen. I didn’t want to stand out. I wanted to fit in. It had nothing to do with religion...Zainab was an old lady’s name, and I just wanted to be called something cool, like Jasmine. (Salbi 36)

By being attached to the “historical Zainab,” Salbi felt as if she were detached from her real identity because people dealt with her as only belonging to that religious circle, or to the Shia. Although the actual person Zainab had a very powerful place in Islamic history and was regarded as a strong and upright woman, Salbi felt that being attached to her would definitely impact her own identity as a person, a feeling which most critics read as legitimate. Bhurga underscores that losing any aspect of one’s identity, e.g., ethnic, religious, racial, or cultural identity, might give rise to dramatic changes in one’s imagination for his or her identity (21).

In addition to her concern about her given name which she considers as a representative of her identity, Salbi also grapples with familial affiliations. One of these aspects is that her family’s connection with Hussein diminished her feeling of independence and accordingly defined her in terms of this social linkage:

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Zainab is considered a heroine in Islam. She is the daughter of Fatima, the wife of Prophet Mohammed. Zainab witnessed a battle in which her brothers and cousins were all killed. She and other women were taken as prisoners; she yelled at her oppressors and dared to speak up in front of them. She spent the rest of her life spreading the events she saw in that battle so no oppressors could ever commit such an injustice again. (Salbi 36)

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When I was growing up in Iraq, people used to refer to me as the “pilot’s daughter.” I hated that term. I still do. It stole from me my very identity, everything I wanted to be. It defined me in terms of my father and defined him, in turn, by his most infamous passenger: a despot millions of Iraqis feared. (Salbi 4)

In this excerpt, Zainab explains how her identity had been “infected” and how she was unfairly defined by the political and social atmosphere around her. She feels that this kind of connection to her father, who was in turn connected to Saddam, made her lose her identity.

Further Salbi’s trauma increased dramatically as she came to realize that everything she achieved would be attributed to her being the “pilot’s daughter,” even within her immediate family (Salbi 71). She was convinced by her father that all her friends befriended her because of him not because of herself (139). She was unable to explore her identity because whenever she tried to do so, her efforts were hindered. She explains how her father’s position had completely erased the features of the identity she imagined. In the excerpt below, she points to the harm she received when her father offered her a piece of advice:

He [her father] really hurt me with that [his discourse about friends who befriended me just because of our status], all the more so because he spoke so casually. Just when I was beginning to think there was a chance I would create my own identity, he was stealing it back from me. People liked me at the university, and I thought it was because I was cool or because I was good student or may be even just because I was me. But he erased those silly assumptions with a single remark. (Salbi 139)
Deluzain hints at the risk that might well occur if one’s identity is judged in light of his or her acquaintance or kin people. He explains that if colonized individuals fail to live up to the expectations of their identities, they would seek to inadvertently detach themselves from the identities to which they were supposed to belong (n.pag.). As a woman in her late teens, Salbi wondered how she could be responsible for that relation and why she should be stigmatized all her life. She also insisted on her right to decide to which group or family she wanted to belong. Born in a climate of political oppression and antagonism, she expresses her anger about the way her identity had been changed and/or usurped.

Salbi’s separation from her personal identity exposed her to more violent seclusion and social sickness, e.g., distrusting people around her and staying far away from the social network. Of course, Salbi’s feeling of being unable to reach a true definition of her own self came with some adverse mental and emotional consequence. She experienced various symptoms of ‘identity-split’ and double-consciousness of her persona, believing that the character ‘Zainab’ had become partially mixed up between being persecuted and colonized in the first half and estranged and alienated in the second.

To further elaborate on this point, Salbi was born in a professional middle class family that was caught between two worlds, the world of outsiders and the world of the insiders. Those people outside the Hussein regime looked at the Salbis as belonging to Hussein’s family or as “palace insiders,” whereas Hussein and palace families viewed them as being outsiders, “just part of the people” (Salbi 131). Ironically, Salbi points out that they were not only viewed as outcasts, but they also developed a strange way of life: being Shia and belonging to the Sunni-dominated circle the Hussein regime made her religious safety hard to predict, especially with the persecution Shii people experienced at
the hands of Hussein. She accordingly concluded that they did not belong to either the "world of powerful or to the world of powerless," (131) being unable to talk about what she had witnessed in the other.

Salbi’s first romantic relationship (a Sunni-Shia relationship), at the age of 20, also made her lose confidence in her home of origin. Throughout her relationship with Ehab, a young Shia student whom she met at university, she was pinning her hopes on that relationship as she felt that he was seemingly open and free, thanks to his seemingly liberal stances. She also came to understand that he was an enemy of Hussein:

Ehab hated Amo. For the first time I had met someone who felt more strongly about him than I did.

“They are all crazy criminal idiots!” he said of Saddam and his tribesmen.

“Vulgar, stupid, all of them! They have sex with their own animals!” (Salbi 143)

However, as the wedding approached, Salbi found that Ehab reacted in a very obsessive, conservative, and extremely jealous manner. He also had shown his hatred of her Shia background, at one point telling her that all Shia people should be killed and accusing them of having tails in their backs (Salbi 157-58). Based upon this change in his demeanor, Salbi broke the engagement, but no sooner had she recovered from her failed relationship with Ehab than Saddam Hussein began to demonstrate his interest in her, prompting her mother to try to establish another marriage proposal with Fakhri, an Iraqi who was working in Chicago. Fakhri was 33 years old; 13 years older than Salbi. However, Salbi initially saw this proposal as an escape from the tyranny she experienced under Hussein and from the “prison” she was living in:

I should not try to live my mother’s dreams, but Baba [my father] was right, but Mama was also right. I didn’t want to stay here and live in her prison, either. I had
been a witness to her suicide attempts, her tears, and her flights to her mother in Karbala. I had witnessed her pain. Was that what lay ahead for me?

Then she added,

I loved visiting the United States, but it was not home. I loved Iraq and could not imagine leaving my family and my whole life behind. But years of weekends at the farmhouse (Hussein’s compound) had taken their toll. I was deathly afraid of being trapped like my mother, both physically and emotionally. In the end, I didn’t say yes to Fakhri, I said yes to Mama. (Salbi 164-65)

After she decided that her mother’s idea of an arranged marriage was worth trying, she convinced herself that love would come after marriage.

The United States of America: Salbi’s Host Home

In the hope of finding a better home in America, it had been arranged for Salbi to marry an older man who was an acquaintance of her family. As with Ahmed, Salbi felt that the marriage might help her find a home; however, Salbi’s first marriage ended up creating a more abusive situation than the one she had had in her life in her home of origin. Salbi’s husband, Fakhri, did not respect her principles and patterns of thinking. She explains how he changed dramatically after marriage when they were still on their honeymoon in Hawaii. The excerpt below shows reasons why Salbi’s marriage to Fakhri was disillusioning from the start:

...They had buffets at the hotel, and he lied so we could eat free, claiming he had lost complementary tickets that came with the show. Then he told me to eat as much as I could get all the food I needed for the day. I was shocked and embarrassed. This was not the world I had come from. I had been taught honesty since birth and trained never to lie or steal. Now I was married to a man who did
both of these things and was rude and cheap as well. At night, he started telling me I wasn’t “womanly” and didn’t know how to please a man. (Salbi 176-77)

Even worse, he later called her “whore” by accusing her of not being virgin when he married her: “What? What’s wrong with you?” He asked, the first time they made love. “Come on, open up! I’m sure you know how… Well, you are not a virgin,” he said. “No blood came out” (177).

Although Fakhri later came to believe that Salbi was a virgin, he did not change the way he dealt with her and as they came back to Chicago he imposed other rules such as her doing the ironing, washing, cooking, etc. Not only did Fakhri impose some new rules, but his mother also did. As she came to visit she reminded Salbi:

...As a good wife, you must be prepared to satisfy your husband’s sexual needs at any time. His needs come first-did your mother not teach you this? Tell me, do you bathe before bedtime and put on perfume? Do you do up your hair and put on sexy lingerie before you walk around the bed seven times to offer yourself to him? (183-84)

The tension escalated in their marriage until he raped her. Salbi depicts her situation as one of extreme irony: her mother Alia, herself a rape victim of Hussein, arranged a marriage for Salbi to rescue her from being raped by Hussein, but almost immediately after marrying Fakhri, Salbi was raped by her husband in the home which she imagined would be safe and ideal. The excerpt below details the rape scene and points to the degree of humiliation that Salbi felt:

The next time we quarreled, I refused to have sex with him. He screamed at me and threw me down on the bed. Then he flipped me over onto my stomach and forced my head into the pillow...I cried into the pillowcase until my voice
disappeared. I couldn’t breathe, and I was afraid I was going to die of suffocation.

I vividly remember how powerless I felt. Finally, I continuously stopped resisting
and took my soul away, leaving my body an empty shell for him to abuse so he
had the illusion of power over me. (Salbi 184)

Based upon this experience, Salbi felt confused, fragmented, and depressed,
unable to make up her mind about the home to which she had pinned great hopes. This
home, for her, becomes prison:

I began to feel I had escaped prison in Iraq only to wind up in solitary
confinement in Chicago. I felt depressed and trapped. I looked around my
apartment and thought of the... [compound where I had lived with Hussein] and
did now what I had done then: I read. With no money and no one to talk to, I
turned to Danielle Steel. There were so many of her paperbacks in the used
bookstore near our house, I could only hope they would last me until I learned the
secret of how to love husband who didn’t seem to care about loving me. Danielle
Steel wrote about women in abusive relationships, and she rewarded them by
setting them free. (Salbi 179)

In addition to her feeling of depression and alienation in the United States, Salbi
experienced other matters of duality which increased considerably especially with the
advent of the Gulf war(s) in the 1990s. Symptoms of psychological and physical pain
that impacted Zainab because of being the “pilot’s daughter” had increased by the Gulf
War as she found herself living in what began to feel like another prison:

I found myself stranded in America by the Gulf war. That was the most painful
time of my life. For very good reasons, I had come to trust no one, not even my
mother. I had just turned twenty-one, and I found myself all alone for the first time as fresh new fears were heaped on all the old ones. (Salbi 4)

Despite the emotional and psychological pain that she felt at that time, Salbi, like Ahmed, came to the conclusion that one should educate oneself. She tried to heal herself by reading literature in the hope of finding answers – a fact that underscores her own motivation, years later, for writing a memoir in order to help other women in distress. In this excerpt, Salbi expresses her sorrowfulness because the marriage did not help her find a home:

The sad part was that I could see other professional couples who had made successful, loving marriages out of engagements facilitated by their parents or elders. Fakhri, on the other hand, seemed to see me as a kind of mail order bride, like the lonely girl from Iran, like thousands of other immigrant brides streaming into the United States from oppressed countries worldwide. (Salbi 182-83)

Additionally, in the United States, Salbi’s own understanding of her personal identity looked more confusing than before; she became uncertain about who she was and how and/or why she came to America. After fleeing her home in Chicago and seeking a divorce in Los Angeles, Salbi was interviewed by the *Los Angeles Times*; Salbi expressed her confusion and perplexity about her lost identity and her inability to reach a true self-definition for who she was. Salbi’s reader can observe her unsteady identity: “…I didn’t even know how to describe myself. I wasn’t a refugee. I wasn’t a tourist. I came here as a bride, but I wasn’t a wife” (Salbi 190).

At this point, she felt that she was confused between her love of the US, as the host home which she imagined would be ideal, and between Iraq, her home of origin. She expressed her wish to go home to Iraq, because she figured that she might reconcile
with her family again: “I really, really, really wanted to go home” (Salbi 186). However, this might be the first time she expressed her wish to return back to her home of origin as she felt it could be the only solution to recover from her problem (Abdelrazek 176).

Despite her initial disappointments, the US provided her with an intermediary space out of which she could heal and then act. Salbi mentioned that life in the US had granted her hope. She expressed her happiness because she was able to work and earn her own living while she attended school at night. The space which America provided her with enabled her to liberate and free herself from her cultural, social, and religious traditions that shaped her life under Hussein’s regime. When she met and agreed to marry Amjad, a fellow political activist, Salbi was surprised when the Imam who would be officiating their wedding asked her about any conditions she wanted to document in the contract. Up until this point, Salbi had never known that in many Muslim communities, women had very specific rights regarding the arrangement of their married lives:

Oh my god, I had no idea! I had just learned about a whole new right nobody had ever explained to me I had as a Muslim woman. Another thing we hadn’t been told in Iraq! How many women knew about this? Even my mother, who had just finalized her divorce, didn’t know! If I had only known about this when I was marrying Fakhri. (208)

Salbi felt that through this experience and others like them, the space she gained in the United States made her more powerful. The reader can notice the tone of power in Salbi’s words:

*I had made a vow to myself never to let anyone hurt me or control me again. I was in what I thought of as my “survivor mode.” And if anyone had asked how I*
visualized myself, the answer would have been as a castle with moat around it and
guards on top with their weapons pointed out. (Salbi 199, emphasis added)

Once she had developed a new and independent life for herself in the US, Salbi
was able to get a good job in Washington as an assistant to the ambassador in the League
of Arab States (Salbi 212-13). Salbi gained more academic and intellectual guidance and
experience by holding different jobs and enrolling as full-time student at George Mason
University majoring in women’s studies and in international studies. She learned about
feminism in a global context, as well, an education that would pave the way for her own
work as an activist, especially as she noted that most major political and military actions
led to suffering by women: “…Stalin ordered Russian soldiers to rape as many German
women as possible during World War II. I learned about the Holocaust, the anti-apartheid
movement in South Africa [and their impact on women]” (Salbi 212).

Significantly, in addition to healing herself, Salbi was able to liberate her mother
from the tyranny of Hussein. After she reconciled with her mother, Salbi invited her
mother to join a real world of women, and to help other women break their silence:

One of the things on my agenda was to show her [Salbi’s mother] what I had
accomplished despite what she had done to me. I wanted to show her the new me,
the women’s advocate who had founded an international women’s organization,
the excerpt on women survivors of war who published papers on the subject,
appeared on the television, and was doing her best to make a difference in
people’s lives. ..I took her to our office and explained our program and what we
were trying to accomplish…She listened to everything I said and began working
as a volunteer, reading and filing letters from women in Bosnia, Croatian and
Rwanda. She is the one who inspired me to do this work, both through her example and through the feminist books she had given me. (x)

Salbi’s new feminist identity, which she constructed in the US, enabled her to construct her own spiritual world whose top priority involved securing rights and a voice for other women.

Salbi’s Imagined Practical Home

Like the intellectual home which Ahmed established in the US for herself and for other women, Salbi was able to develop a spiritual home like that of the utopian “women’s village” which her mother, along with her aunts and other women, had talked about when they were young (Salbi 22). In that kind of home, or “paradise,” as the women wished to call it, Salbi’s mother imagined a “utopian” home in which men were not the masters. This utopian home would be run by women and it, then, according to Salbi, would definitely be better:

And so they conjured up an idyllic village filled with cottages and farmhouses that were close together so their children could grow up like cousins. The skies were always bright over the Women’s village and the river that ran through it glinted with sunbeams. There were birds and flowers everywhere, and women spent their time singing and dancing with lovely children. There was no poverty and no war, for in this lovely meeting place between real life and fantasy, women were smart enough to talk with each other and find answers to those problems. Men were admitted to this paradise only for weekly visiting hours, which, I innocently assumed at the time, were for fathers to visit their children the way Baba visited us when he was at home. (Salbi 22)
Similarly, the spiritual, but not utopian, home that Salbi successfully established was Women for Women International. Salbi was able to help thousands of war refugees all over the world, especially in war torn countries such as Bosnia, Croatia, and Rwanda. This organization offered financial and emotional support to women who survived the war. It was funded by a network of American women, Canadian women and, even Bangladeshi women sponsors. The policy these sponsors employed was to send monthly checks to a war victim. Salbi and her husband Amjad would go to war-torn countries and listen to women’s stories and offer the women cash and other essentials for living (Salbi 220-21). By so doing, they were able to help war victims no longer feel alone. They would share their worries, concerns, and stories with other “sisters” all over the world. As part of the system of building “a women’s village,” each sponsoring woman would write a letter to the refugee, and the refugee, in turn, would write back to share and spread their stories (Salbi 221-23). Today, Salbi’s organization has many branches all over the world, and, for Salbi, it has become representative of her own identity: “I created a whole new identity for myself as the founder and president of a nonprofit women’s organization called Women for Women International, which supports women survivors of war” (Salbi 4 emphasis added).

Conclusion

Salbi’s *Between Two Worlds* is a courageous and brave memoir, as it includes very specific details about her sexual history. In order to build a bridge between herself and other women, she details all the scenes that plagued her life, including the rape scene she experienced with her first husband in the US. Writing that detailed scene indicates that Salbi was able to break her silence. Additionally, Salbi’s memoir, as a non-fictive piece written in the aftermath of September 11th, shows how women’s voices have
rebelled against their authoritarian patriarchal culture, found and/or imagined new homes, and constructed new identities. In other words, instead of keeping their works limited to the scope of theory and philosophy, they changed these theories into practices. Salbi was able to change her identity from an undesirable identity - “the pilot’s daughter” - into the new identity of Zainab the feminist and the founder of WFWI. The identity which Zainab wished to forge was global in nature and based upon practical action. She became a “whole” person, thus enabling her to become a voice that would call for other women to break their silence, rebuild their future, and to reject their powerless and colonized identities (Salbi 4).

Both Ahmed and Salbi tried to amalgamate an identity that was a “blend of American and female components,” (Chérif 208) an act that helped her to reconcile her dual identities. As for Salbi, it was noticeable that her approach of creating a special identity and a practical home came true. Her experience of escaping from her home of origin into the intellectual host home culminated with developing a real-life practical home that helps women survive and provides them with multiple means of emotional and financial support.
CHAPTER IV

EXPLORING SATRAPI’S IMAGINED ARTISTIC HOME IN
PERSEPOLIS

Overview

To continue my discussion about how Middle Eastern and Arab-American women depict the concept of home, I will examine Marjane Satrapi’s The Complete Persepolis. Persepolis originally came out in French in two separate volumes (tomes), in 2000 and 2001” (Chute, Graphic Women, n. pag.). Satrapi completed the third and fourth tomes of Persepolis in 2002 and 2003, respectively; these were published in the U.S. as Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return (2004)” (Chute, Graphic Women, n. pag.). In this graphic novel, Satrapi describes her struggle to find a whole identity for herself, rather than the fragmented identity she had in her home of origin, and to find a home where she would be able to act freely far away from the oppressive religious environment that prevailed in the aftermath of the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979.16

Prior to commenting on the biography of Marjane Satrapi, I need to explain how I will refer to her in the discussion. Notably, I have referred to the memoirists of A Border Passage and Between Two Worlds as Ahmed and Salbi respectively because that is the way most critics and reviewers have done. For the sake of being consistent, I will be referring to Satrapi by her last name, although some critics and scholars of graphic novels have referred to her differently, distinguishing between Satrapi the narrator and Marji as the protagonist.

Marjane Satrapi is an Iranian-French novelist who was born in Rasht, Iran, in 1969. She attended the Lycée Français in Tehran, Iran. Satrapi studied illustration at Strasbourg, France, a major that taught her about the art of using images and illustrations to help readers become involved in the scenes which she draws partly by observing "...how much emotion can be conveyed in the single tilt of a line" (Hoashi 163) and partly by recognizing the "dominant tropes of unspeakability, invisibility, and inaudibility" in a given scene (Chute 93). Her academic efforts culminated in her writing *Persepolis*, a graphic memoir account of her personal experience in Iran as she grew up during the Islamic revolution and the Iraqi-Iranian war in the 1970s (*Contemporary Authors Online* n.pag.).

Like many other Arab-American and Middle Eastern memoirists, Satrapi enjoyed a very privileged and progressive childhood in Tehran. She was born into a liberal "left-leaning" family that provided her with a healthy environment, enabling her to create a unique and rebellious identity (Hoashi 162). Her parents instilled in the value of questioning established norms by running a "liberal household" as a contrast to the fundamentalist society in which they lived. Her maternal grandfather was the son of Nasreddine Shah, the last Emperor of Iran. She was well-cultivated, especially in politics; while her classmates read fairy tales, she spent most of her time reading cartoons about Marxism (*Contemporary Authors Online* n.pag.). This high level of education and freethinking at such an early stage of Satrapi's childhood definitely instilled in her a sense of rebelliousness that readers can witness everywhere in her memoir. Her early reading habits might also explain why Satrapi has juxtaposed the comic and the serious in *Persepolis.*
David Yezzi defines the graphic novel as a “book-length story that combines pictures and text” (n.pag.). It might seem that readers would react negatively to the idea of portraying violence and repression via the comic medium. According to Gwen Athene Tarbox, since “...Spiegelman’s Maus won the Pulitzer Prize in 1993, US readers have begun to accept that the medium could be used to convey weighty topics and ideas” (Personal interview with Tarbox n.pag.). Yezzi adds “...the graphic novels are normally lengthier, and tackle more serious subjects” (n.pag.). As is the case in Satrapi’s Persepolis, another quality of this kind of memoir is that it openly demonstrates sexuality, sexual violence, and other violent acts that reflect the complexity of the sociopolitical situation in which the memoir was written (Yezzi n.pag.). In the case of Satrapi’s text, it is apparent that Satrapi sought to present her memoir in a mix of comical, sexual, and dreadful scenes, a feature that might attract a larger readership in the West and promote the dissemination of the memoir especially because its target audience would be adults who enjoy such subject matter. The fact that her novel is equipped with such qualities, I argue, makes Satrapi a courageous memoirist, just like Salbi, who dared to not only to critique her culture, but also to depict and to detail the horrible scenes of her rape experience.

I have chosen to write about Persepolis because it is familiar to US readers and because it has been well-received by critics and the public. Chute has stated that Persepolis “was not only a surprise bestseller but also what L’Association publisher Jean-Christophe Menu correctly terms a “‘phenomenon’.” Chute also has mentioned that Persepolis has attracted the “most international attention of any graphic narrative in the past ten years” (Chute, Graphic Women, n. pag.). Supporting Chute’s argument, Naghibi and O’Malley mention that Persepolis reflects some qualities that other memoirists have
failed to employ in their graphic novels or narratives. For these critics, it “...defies easy
categorization,” and it also “forces the Western reader to work hard to understand the
complexities of contemporary Iranian political and social dynamics” (225). As far as this
study is concerned, I think that Persepolis also shares several important commonalities
with Ahmed and Salbi’s memoirs, thus enabling me to demonstrate that the concept of
“home” has resonance across the spectrum of Middle Eastern and Arab-American
women’s memoirs. On the one hand, Persepolis reflects the difficulty faced by Muslim
women, who write in support of their feminist ideals and about their search for new
homes that would foster their ideological explorations. On the other hand, it shows how
these women, under the name of religious traditions, were oppressed. However, like
Ahmed and Salbi, Satrapi stood up for her rights and was able to create, imagine, and
visualize a spiritual home that would correspond to her feminist and her artistic
ambitions.

Chute further comments on the popularity of Persepolis. She argues that it was
Persepolis’ visual simplicity coupled with the emotional and political complexities that
explain its popularity (105). Additionally, Chute believes that what adds to making
Persepolis more popular is the writer’s ability to show the “complicated connections
between personal and public histories” (n.pag.). That is why, according to Chute,
Persepolis has earned the most popular and worldwide attention, more than any fictive or
non-fictive graphic novel. Similarly, Costantino points out how text created an
enormously popular success by granting Persepolis the status of “BD culte,” which in
French means a comic strip following for both the memoirist and the text itself; they have
become a like a “reference” or a symbol of the genre (Chute 105). Costantino further
elaborates on what made Persepolis highly valued and well-received:
Readers are often familiar with the genre of “exile narratives” and therefore are comfortable with a story that depicts a liberal, educated Iranian family struggling to survive in a war-torn country, with parents who ultimately realize that their only child must leave Iran for the safety of Europe. In addition, Satrapi’s depiction of Muslim leaders as uneducated, primitive, and narrow-minded brutes strengthens her connection with her Western readers whose perception of Muslim extremists might indeed be quite similar to the one crafted in the autobiography. Finally, Satrapi’s presentation of Iranian culture and history fascinates and attracts audiences that may have a limited knowledge of Iran. (432)

Satrapi, the narrator, chose a very influential genre - the graphic memoir- in which to portray her life experience. As Naghibi and O’Malley point out, like the majority of post-colonial literary authors, Satrapi employed this kind of memoir as a means of outlining the “complexities and contingencies of identity” (223). Like other diasporic Iranian memoirists, Satrapi wrote her memoir to “challenge the stereotype of self-effacing, modest Iranian women [and to write herself] back into the history of the nation” (Naghibi and O’Malley 224). As I previously argued about the powerful role of the memoir in providing readers with an insider’s perspective of life within a restrictive regime, Farzaneh Milani and Afsaneh Najmabadi similarly argued that these stories always have been perceived as a “form of metaphorical unveiling as indecorous as physical activity” (qtd. in Naghibi and O’Malley 224). Additionally, in this graphic memoir, drawn in black and white, Satrapi describes how she “bears witness to a childhood uniquely entwined with the history of her country” (Targeted News Service n.pag.). That is to say, as has been the trend for the vast majority of post-colonial writers, Satrapi has become the spokesperson for her country; she not only narrates the
story of her own childhood, or looks for a home of her own, but she speaks on the behalf of all Iranian girls who have struggled against the authoritarian patriarchal and fundamentalist culture found in Iran since 1979 (Marcus n.pag.). At this point, I argue that like Ahmed and Salbi, Satrapi hoped to become a voice for oppressed women who suffered under oppressive regimes.

Satrapi mentions in the introduction of *Persepolis* that she wrote the memoir mainly to demonstrate some of the hidden, unsaid, and unspoken facts about her culture and home, a country that had, since the 2000 US election, been classified by President George W. Bush as belonging to “the axis of evil” and has been characterized in Western media as being fundamentalist and fanatic since the late 1970s.

Satrapi attributes the political and religious turmoil that has prevailed in her country in the twentieth century and until the present day to the consecutive Western and Arab invasions designed to take advantage of richness of the Iranian culture. Iran, under the leadership of Reza Shah, was occupied by the Allies because of their sympathetic situation with the Germans during the World War II. In addition, Iran has always invited attacks because of its geographical location, as is evidenced by the conquests of the Macedonians under Alexander the Great, the Iraqis, the Turks, and the Mongolians (Satrapi 1-2). Supporting Satrapi’s argument, Kristin Anderson states that Satrapi’s “…striking, tender illustrations and necessarily laconic text both work compellingly towards one end: correcting Western misconceptions about Iran” (Anderson n.pag.). In short, Satrapi’s graphic novel is intended to tell the West that not all Iranians belong to the narrow circle that Bush placed them in.

Satrapi, the narrator, begins her memoir by commenting on the restrictions imposed by the new Islamic regime which came to power after the Shah had been
dethroned in 1979. Throughout her memoir, Satrapi visualizes many scenes that detail her early childhood at school and her daily life. In most of these scenes, the young Satrapi is shown to act in a rebellious way towards any situation that does not correspond to the values she was taught by her family. Although the young Satrapi is depicted as naïve in the first few pages (e.g., at the age of six, she is sure that she, like Mohammed, another “last prophet”), with the passage of time, she matures politically and socially. Anderson states that as “…her political consciousness develops…so too does the realism of her images” (n.pag.). Here, this exact feature corresponds to Salbi’s point about children asking questions of authority or thinking independently, which she depicts in her memoir as being dangerous. Like Salbi, Satrapi’s parents decide to send her abroad at the age of fourteen, partly to escape the inevitable tyranny of the Islamic regime and partly to pursue a better education that might sustain her rebellious mentality. They accordingly decide to send her to Austria because her mother’s Iranian friend, Zozo, lives there and, most importantly, because at that time, it was easy to get an Austrian visa (Satrapi 147).

In fact, the way Satrapi structures her memoir has played a great role in attracting a readership. The technique of using images rather than solely relying on text, she claims, enables her to communicate to the reader things in images that would be hard to convey in writing. She hints at the post-modern feature of employing the “unsaid” and the “unspoken” in her realistic representation of ideas, as well. Hoashi points out that the technique of illustration Satrapi employs in Persepolis has amazed readers, especially the excessive patterns of “…emotion [that] can be conveyed in a single tilt in a line” (163). Similarly, Scott McCloud has commented on the main effect of what he calls “cartooning;” referring to Satrapi’s drawings, he points to the fact that she focuses on a
specific detail and then makes it universal (qtd. in Naghibi and O’Malley 228). Satrapi further emphasizes this same idea in one of her interviews:

“There are so many things that you can say through images that you cannot say with the writing. The comics is the only media in the whole world that you can use the image plus the writing and plus the imagination and plus be active while reading it. When you are reading comics, between one frame to the other what is happening, you have to imagine it yourself. So you are active; you have to take part actually when you read the story.” (qtd. in Root 150)

Given that Persepolis was first written in French, a language with which very few Iranians are familiar, I think that Satrapi wanted to avoid being critiqued by fellow Iranian writers, and that’s why most critics also infer that Satrapi’s target audience is Western (Yezzi n.pag). Because she recognizes the sensitivity of criticizing or counterattacking her religion, Satrapi has said that she definitely wanted to avoid any kind of political conflict with the Islamic regime in Iran, such as that of Salaman Rushdi who the Ayatollah Khomeini attacked by issuing a fatwa to kill him for writing his book The Satanic Verses. This might explain why Persepolis has not yet been officially translated into Farsi or Persian (Chute 94). However, Anderson points out that Persepolis has been criticized by Iranian authorities because it depicts the Iranian “theocracy” as being universally fundamentalist and extreme. This explains why Satrapi categorizes Persepolis under the heading of a “counter-narrative to Western prejudice.” She explains that her narrative is filled with “disbelief, irony and rage both at those who perpetuate Iran’s fundamentalism and those who judge it from afar” (Anderson n.pag).
Historical Context

Satrapi’s text was set during a time period that was highly charged politically. She begins her book at the transitional period of Iran turning into a republic, a period that witnessed changing the country’s monarchy under the Shah into an Islamic Republic led by the Islamic leader Ayatollah Khomeini, who returned to Iran after fifteen years of exile (Abrahamian 162). This event has been referred to as the Islamic or Iranian Revolution. By the virtue of what Abrahamian called “civil disobedience,” the revolution had peacefully brought into power a very strong and dictatorial regime. He shows how ordinary “…civilians armed with religious slogans were able to bring down a vast, well heeled, and impregnable-looking state” (162).

Commenting on the negative aspects of the Iranian revolution, historian Mehran Kamrava describes the Iranian revolution as being spontaneous, rather than planned. In his view, this had enabled inexperienced, under-educated, and radical people to rise quickly to power and therefore the possibility for violence and unsteadiness was woven into the regime from the very beginning. In support of this argument, Satrapi mentions the story told by her grandmother who lived in the days of the Shah’s father and claimed that he was only giving fake promises, when he publicly proclaimed, “I am the light of the Aryans. I will make this country the most modern of all time. Our people will regain their splendor” (Satrapi 27, emphasis original).

The country was designated as an Islamic Republic subsequent to a referendum conducted in April of the year 1979, the same year which witnessed the Tehran-United States crisis in which the US embassy staff in Tehran were taken as hostages. In 1980, a failed coup was attempted against the Republic, thus leading to many cultural and educational changes that eventually created “purges” in the educational system in Iran.
In September 1982, Iraq invaded Iran, a war that lasted eight years and which ended on August 1988 by a UN resolution for cease-fire. However, Iran decided to stay neutral in the second gulf war when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait (Gheissari and Nasr xiv-xv).

Right after the establishment of the Islamic Constitution in Iran, many strict regulations were enforced to “Islamicize” the country and liberate it from the perceived abuse caused by the previous royal system. Many radical changes accordingly took place after the Shah was exiled. Women were forced to wear veils when they went out of the home to attend schools or to work. Also, the new regime spread all aspects of religiosity in the country and engaged in the process of building mosques and minarets (Amuzegar 24-25). Any people who violated the regime’s rules ended up arrested, imprisoned or killed.

Jerrold Green further elaborates on the scope of changes, beyond the veil, that prevailed after Khomeini’s return to power:

The atmosphere throughout Iran reflected a discernible decline in popular sympathy with the regime. Martial law became intolerable as people were arrested or even killed by nervous martial law authorities. A doctor on the way to an emergency was shot by an army patrol. Stories of such “accidents” were commonplace throughout the country. In Tehran, for example, in places of work unaffected by strikes, little work was done. (Green 118-19)

Further, Jahangir Amuzegar elaborates on the notion of the spiritual leadership of Islamic revolution, claiming that the revolution was wholly religiously-oriented. For him, among other scholars, the revolution was completely Islamic for three reasons: the rise of Khomeini, a leader most known for his religiosity, as the supreme leader of the revolution; the use of religious networks and slogans that functioned as means of communication among the followers of the Khomeini, and finally the establishment of
the Islamic Republic. In the excerpt below, Amuzegar further elaborates on some of the religious aspects that followed the revolution:

Mass prayers in the streets, growing use of the veil (chador) by young university woman, and the thundering cries of Allah-o Akbar (God is Great) from Tehran rooftops at night were the oppositions major battle hymn and rallying cry. More significantly, tens of thousands of mosques and Mullahs scattered throughout the country served as an unparalleled communications network. (Amuzegar 24-25; emphasis original)

However, despite the noble and peaceful principles through which the revolution was adopted, many Iranian people, Satrapi’s parents among them, were disappointed to learn that these were only slogans and no more than flying words. Satrapi recalled a conversation with her mother in which she spoke sarcastically of the way the Shah laughed at the naiveté of the people when he first came to power:

“You know my child, since the dawn of time, dynasties have succeeded each other but the kings always kept their promises. The Shah kept none; I remember the day he was crowned. He said: I am the light of the Aryans. I will make this country the most modern of all time. Our people will regain their splendor.”

(Satrapi 27)

In this excerpt, Satrapi’s mother compares her past days under the Shah with the upcoming days under the new Islamic regime. Her talk definitely illustrates that although at the beginning, regimes seem to act in a noble way, as soon as they feel more empowered, they start suppressing people’s freedoms. This excerpt foreshadows the hardships that await the Satrapis, among others, under the new regime.
Satrapi’s Conflict with the Home of Origin

Although Satrapi was only in grade school when the Iranian Revolution occurred, she was impacted by the patriarchal and authoritarian culture that aimed at suppressing intellectuals like her parents by forbidding them to express their ideas openly against the “noble cause” of the Revolution. Satrapi portrays herself as an outspoken child who, from the outset, rebelled against all signs of oppression and refused to be engulfed within the circle of the new regime by disobeying all the rules that they enacted, including rules regarding the veil. To support my argument, I will describe some of the scenes Satrapi recounts regarding her childhood in which she shows her disobedience of the strict rules imposed by the new Islamic Revolution; I will also explain her early understanding of critical issues such as class, and her fear that she feels in her home of origin.

In order to demonstrate how much Satrapi rebels against the strict rules regarding wearing the veil, she visualizes a scene at the very beginning of her book. In the first panel, Satrapi, drawn as a young girl, looks semi-veiled with some of her front hair appearing under the veil. She is sitting down with her hands crossed, her eyes widely open, and her mouth is closed. In textbook, the narrator introduces herself and her age, “This is me, when I was 10 years old. This was in 1980” (Satrapi 3). Satrapi also pictures herself with the veil covering almost all of her body apart from her arms. Here, Satrapi’s point of presenting the veil on page one raises is significant. It posits Satrapi’s relationship to a Western audience by demonstrating the genesis of the meaning of the veil. It also introduces the Western reader, who is the target audience for Satrapi, to a subject which he or she would like to know more about, especially in the aftermath of September 11th attacks and also after some countries, like France, best known for their liberalism and openness, began to ban wearing the veil in their countries. The way in
which the young Satrapi wears the veil with her bangs not being covered properly, predicts Satrapi’s nature, setting the stage for the rebellious acts that will come.

In the panel at the bottom, Satrapi recounts some other scenes of her younger self as she responds carelessly regarding the obligatory wearing of the veil. She uncovers her hair and starts playing with the veil. She, along with her classmates, uses it to jump rope and play the monster of darkness. Satrapi explains that she and her classmates at that age used the veil as a tool for fun simply because they did not understand why they had to wear it. She mentions, “[We] didn’t really like to wear the veil, especially since we didn’t understand why we had to” (Satrapi 3).

Satrapi depicts other incidents from her childhood that show how she, at ten, was able to develop a good understanding of class issues. In order to demonstrate how much she abhorred class, Satrapi recounts a scene when she wanted to be a prophet in order to equalize people’s social stations in life (Satrapi 6). In one left panel at the bottom of page 6, Satrapi depicts her parents eating in the dining room, while their maid sits by herself in the kitchen. This scene also reflects upon Satrapi’s feminist perspectives and can be compared to Ahmed’s depiction of a similar situation at Cambridge, where students sat down to eat their lunch while maids with aprons served the food. Another scene that shows Satrapi’s early understanding of class issue involves her father’s Cadillac. In this panel, she pictures her father driving the Cadillac while she, in the back seat, tries to hide herself from other people in the street so that her friends would not know that her parents had such privileges. That said, throughout the previous scenes, Satrapi both shows her early understanding of the political and cultural matters that took place around her and also comments on the hardships she, among other people, witnessed.
In addition to the subject matter of the veil and of class, Satrapi describes another scene in which her mother was featured in a German magazine that was reporting on citizen protest in Iran. In the left panel at the bottom of page 5, Satrapi depicts the fear on her mother’s face as she recognizes her picture in the magazine while her father tries to comfort her. In the next panel, she shows her mother looking fearfully into a mirror, as she dyes her hair in an attempt to disguise herself. In the third panel, Satrapi pictures her mother wearing dark glasses and passing by some of the Revolutionary Guardians who view her suspiciously. Placing these scenes in the setting of her memoir, Satrapi definitely aims at showing that she not only understood the political situation in her home of origin, but she also foreshadows the hardships that are yet to come.

In spite of Satrapi’s increasing feeling of fear in her home of origin, she expresses that during her childhood, she enjoyed living in a home of liberalism and progressiveness. The internal support that she receives from her family home instills in her a strong feeling of empowerment that enables her to rebel in the streets of Tehran. The intellectual and emotional support and the sense of liberation that Satrapi feels come from her parents who seem well-versed in the ideology of great scholars and rebels such as Marx and Lenin, Fidel Castro and Che Guevara. However, this kind of intellectual space was not enough to ensure that she would feel safe outside her family home. She experiences much trouble at school and in the streets; the extreme Islamic regulations and bigotry make her home of origin an unhealthy environment.

Unlike the home environments experienced by Ahmed or Salbi, Satrapi’s family life provided her with emotional, physical, and political empowerment, so that she is able to receive her revolutionary ideas early on. Unlike Salbi, Satrapi had parents who had never tried to stop her from speaking or expressing herself, even when she commits
mistakes. This attitude also reflects on Salbi’s experience of Ayeb, and aar (these Arabic words translate into disgrace, taboo, and shame, respectively) that have prevailed in the Arab and Islamic worlds, thus sometimes overtly and other times inadvertently suppressing women. Satrapi’s parents deviate from this norm, and the impact is felt by Satrapi throughout her childhood.

To support this claim, I will describe three scenes that represent the conflict between what Satrapi learns in her family home and what she learns outside that home. In the panel at the bottom of page 132, Satrapi depicts her younger self, walking home after she has bought some tapes from Ghandi Avenue. Because she is so wrapped up in the music, she fails to notice the Revolutionary Guardians who are following and closely observing her actions. In the car’s window appear three veiled women with signs of anger on their faces; the guardian in the passenger’s seat points her hand towards the pre-teen Satrapi. In the next panel, Satrapi shows how her younger self, walks with her hands in her pockets, looking scared as two tall wholly-veiled guardians with menacing facial features stop her. The last scene is depicted in the panel on the upper right hand side in which young Satrapi is seen talking to the guardian with some signs of panic in her eyes (Satrapi 134). Her facial expressions indicate that she is making a sad face so that the guardian who looks very angry and suspicious may believe her.

In these scenes in which young Satrapi is disciplined for violating the rules of the Revolution, Satrapi points out that her home of origin is not a safe place to live if one possesses liberal and modern ideas. However, as a girl, Satrapi comes to realize that the best place for her to express herself openly is at home. By contrast, Salbi never felt safe at home, and she always felt insecure because she, along with her family, never had privacy from Saddam Hussein and his guards at their home, simply because Hussein
would break into their home any time he wished. This explains why the Salbis always acted cautiously at home, never mentioning the name Saddam. On the other hand, the Satrapis are shown to be much more open in their critique of the Revolution and its leaders.

Notably, during their teens, the three women in my study learn to repress a public expression of their true feelings and beliefs. Ahmed, Salbi and Satrapi, though growing up in somewhat different times and places, learn that the ideology which they adopt definitely would not be accepted in their homes of origin, simply because these ideas and beliefs would oppose the oppressive regimes in which they lived. They, nevertheless, keep reviving these ideas and beliefs in different places other than their homes of origin. For example, Ahmed and Satrapi share the commonality of critiquing fundamental Islam and its negative role in suppressing women’s beliefs, but they are unable to criticize openly their religion when they live in their homes of origin. In her memoir, Ahmed speaks of the Women’s Islam in US but she is able to reveal her ideas openly in the Egypt.

I argue that the experiences which she witnesses or hears about from her family help Satrapi not only to mature speedily but also to recognize the threat waiting for her in her home of origin. In her introduction to *Persepolis*, Satrapi states, “one can forgive but one should not forget” (Satrapi 2). She mentions this statement in support of her grandfather who was chosen by the King of Iran to become a Prime Minister because he was well-educated. But because of his rebellious thoughts and ideas, which included Marxists calls for dethroning oppressive regimes, he was imprisoned and tortured. He dedicated his life to the ideals he learned from reading communist texts that contained the idea that social class distinctions should be eliminated. Satrapi depicts her grandfather
stating that “[I]t disgusts me that people are condemned to a bleak future by their social class. Long live[s] Lenin.” (Satrapi 28) Hearing the fate of her grandfather – torture via near drowning in a bathtub and then death – Satrapi is transformed from a naïve child into a sophisticated girl, as she becomes fully aware of the political threat revolving around her in her home of origin.

Earlier in the text, Satrapi depicts her relationship with an imaginary representation of God whom she conjures up when she wishes to discuss serious matters. In a panel at the bottom of page 25, Satrapi is depicted with God in the bathroom. God sits on a stool while young Satrapi lies down in a bathtub full of water. In the textbook, the narrator explains what young Satrapi was trying to do, “[that] night I stayed a very long time in the bath. I wanted to know what it felt like to be in a cell filled with water” (Satrapi 25). Reaching this level of political maturity, Satrapi decided to relive the experience of her grandfather as a symbol of her emotional and political connection to him.

When Satrapi reaches puberty, her parents know that she is in great danger. By closely watching her rebellious actions increase rapidly, Satrapi’s parents decide to send her to Austria. In the panel on the top left hand side of page 144, young Satrapi is depicted in religion class, as her teacher excitedly explains the Islamic Revolution in Iran, while the students stare at her, as if suspecting the validity of her words, especially when she claims that under the Islamic Republic, no people have been imprisoned for political reasons. Young Satrapi appears in the second row by herself casting some glances of suspicion at her teacher. In the panel underneath, Satrapi pictures the whole class as they look strangely at young Satrapi who is speaking while the teacher’s facial expressions have completely changed, and she is shown to be grumpy and angry. Satrapi says to her:
“...[My] uncle was imprisoned by the Shah’s regime, but it was the Islamic regime that ordered his execution...” (Satrapi 144).

Based upon the many calls her parents received from school reporting their daughter’s offensive actions, her parents decide to act. In a panel on page 145, while her father looks proud of what his daughter has done at school and argues against the teacher, her mother looks angry and mad, and reminds them of the death penalty which Satrapi’s uncle received. In a more powerful scene, Satrapi depicts how mother openly talks to her about the seriousness of the matter. In the middle panel at the bottom of page 145, Satrapi depicts a scene in which her mother puts her hands on her shoulders and yells at her, reminding her of what might happen to girls who are arrested. She says in the caption, “you know what they do to the young girls they arrest? You know what happened to Niloufar? The girl you have met at Khosro’s house? The man who made passports? So a guardian of revolution marries her...and takes her virginity before executing her. Do you understand what that means?” (Satrapi 145)

Clearly, having learned about what happens to girls who offend the authorities, Satrapi’s mother warns her daughter of having a similar destiny. Satrapi’s mother underscores the fact that their home of origin is no longer a safe place for outspoken girls. This conversation also implies that her parents want her to earn a good quality of education in the West, a decision that Satrapi welcomes, considering it as a “...great...real independence” (Satrapi 148). Hoashi further comments on the motives that make Satrapi’s life hard in her home of origin for both herself and her family:

Marji’s parents insist on her French education, understanding that their daughter may have to leave Iran one day. As Marji enters adolescence, it becomes more and more apparent that she’s not suited for life in Iran under the Islamic regime.
She rocks out to bootleg cassettes of Kim Wilde and Iron Maiden, smokes her first cigarette and cuts classes. (163)

At this turning point in her life, it is worth mentioning that her experience in Iran looks, to a great extent, like Salbi’s experience in Iraq. While Salbi’s mother, Alia, decided to distance her daughter from the eyes of Hussein’s regime and his sons, Satrapi’s parents decided to send their daughter to Austria in the hope that she would escape the tyranny practiced against students of her type. The mothers, in both memoirs, do not want their daughters to be raped by the authorities. Both Salbi and Satrapi feel unsafe in their homes of origin and therefore arrangements are made to ensure their survival through a removal to the West. Ahmed also flees her home of origin because she did not want to undergo similar experiences of those girls and women who like the feminist Huda Shaarawi, who was forcibly married at the age of twelve and who protested this by taking her scarf off in public in front of media cameras.

Like Ahmed and Salbi, Satrapi struggled to create her own sense of independent identity. Although it seemed almost impossible to construct an identity within such dictatorial regime, Satrapi tried to create her own stylish identity. The identity Satrapi thought of is meant to reflect on her rebellious character. To counter the values of the Iranian revolution, she decided to create a westernized identity to rebel against her oppressors and show her antagonistic attitudes towards the revolution.

Also, as with Ahmed and Salbi, Satrapi imagines the West as a place where she might be able to freely express herself, an idea that she will go on to interrogate when she actually moves to the West, but one that was very powerful to her as an Iranian school girl. She, therefore, creates the Western Satrapi which her younger self considers to be a symbol of resistance. In order to demonstrate the depiction of the Western version of her
younger self, Satrapi is shown to admire the image of Kim Wilde. In the upper right hand panel on page 131, Satrapi compares her younger self to the English pop singer Kim Wilde\(^\text{17}\) by imitating her hairstyle, her dress, and her dance moves. Naghibi and O’Malley think of this panel in the graphic novel as an invitation to diminish the “...differences by transforming the radical other into a domesticated [Western] other” (236). Similarly, Christopher Theokas explains that through this image Satrapi wants to show Western readers that if they view her without the veil, they would notice that she is exactly like any other teenager in the West.

By dressing and acting like Kim Wilde, Satrapi attempts to transform herself into someone who is different from the Eastern, veiled, and submissive girl who is required to obey all the restrictions imposed on Iranian teenagers. Theokas notes:

Illuminating the similarities between the Western and Islamic worlds is what Satrapi does best. In both worlds, kids grow up and rebel against their parents and society. They try to shape their own identities. The only difference between a girl growing up in the USA and a girl growing up in Iran is that in Iran, rebellious behavior we take for granted could lead to jail time-if not worse. (qtd. in Naghibi and O’Malley 235-36)

While Theokas’ analysis fails to take into account deeper cultural differences which may exist across cultures, his point regarding the consequences of rebellious behavior on the part of Iranian teenagers rings true, as Satrapi demonstrates in her text. A good example that supports my point is what happens to Satrapi when she returns home after buying some song tapes from Ghandi Avenue another example can be taken from an image in the first section, “The Veil.” In the panel at the upper left hand side Satrapi depicts her

\(^{17}\) See the image of the Westernized Satrapi on the upper right-hand (Persepolis 131).
younger self in an image that divides her face into two halves, half-veiled and half-Westernized. The section on the right-hand side of the panel shows the first half of Satrapi’s face with the veil while its background is decorated with Islamic patterns. On the left-hand side of the panel, the other half of her face looks westernized, showing the other part of her face with a short hairstyle and unveiled. On the background of the panel there are elements that represent the two different homes in her mind: her home of origin and what will soon be her host home. This image clearly indicates that Satrapi is torn between two different homes: her home of origin, including all the complexities of religious and political extremism, and the host home that she imagines as a place of personal and creative expression.

Overall, this image represents the sadness that can be felt in Satrapi’s eyes, a sadness which I read as a sign of her confusion and perplexity about her divided identity; she is forced to adapt to religious ideologies that do not match with her rebellious background. At this point, Satrapi mentions in the textbox of the panel that she is deeply religious inside, but the religion she feels in her heart is different from the religion that people practice in her home of origin. She comments on this fact, especially when she thinks about depicting the veil, “I really didn’t know what to think about the veil, deep down I was very religious but as a family we were very modern and avant-garde” (Satrapi 6). This point exactly corresponds to Ahmed’s idea about the “Islam of women” in which she does not deny her religious identity as a Muslim, but she denies any patriarchal identity enforced in the name of Islam.

In short, this section comments on some of the conditions, experiences, and real-life traumas that made Satrapi’s home of origin a dangerous place for a girl who

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18 See the image on the upper left-hand (Persepolis 6).
developed very rebellious thoughts, especially under the strict Iranian Revolution. In an attempt to search for a better home, Satrapi, as is the case for many women, has to flee her country in the hope of feeling safe abroad. Like Ahmed and Salbi, who came from colonized homes, Satrapi comes to believe that she might be able to construct a better home in the West.

Satrapi’s Host Home: “Europe Awaits You”

From the quote, “Europe Awaits You,” (Satrapi 152) it is clear that the speakers, Satrapi’s parents, pin great hopes on Europe as becoming their fourteen year-old daughter’s new home. However, as Satrapi will go on to demonstrate, her host home in Europe is also a place of complexity and conflict, where she goes through many horrible experiences that change her perspective, yet provide her with an intermediary location that enables her to imagine her own creative space. Based on her liberal education, Satrapi expected the host home to liberate her from the religious traditions which confined her in her home of origin. A top priority was to get rid of all oppressive signs that usurped her identity as a human being. Also she wanted to get rid of the socioreligious practices and traditions that aimed at suppressing her femininity, such as the veil and other enforced religious practices.

During her academic life in Austria, her host home, Satrapi tries to fit and/or assimilate herself in Western culture. However, Satrapi struggles with how she was perceived by her classmates at school; her classmates do not believe her stories about the war, and they criticize her seemingly exotic physical appearance. Satrapi picks up on this point in an interview conducted after the publication of her text:

“the feeling that I am evoking in [Persepolis]is more a problem of when you are going to a new culture and you absolutely want to adapt yourself, and you
absolutely want to be integrated. You have to forget about your own culture first. You know, because culture takes all the space inside you. If you want to have another culture come into you, it’s like you have to take out the first one, and then choose what you want from the two and swallow them again. But it’s the moment you look at everything that it’s this lack of identity.” (Tully, Interview)

Contributing to her confusion is the fact that the young Satrapi struggled hard to find a safe home after the accommodations her parents established for her in Austria fell through. She was unable to stay more than 10 days at Zozo’s house, the home that belonged to a friend of her mother. At Zozo’s home, Satrapi could not stand the daily fights which took place between Zozo and her jobless husband. She also could not stand the calculating and materialistic mentality of Zozo, who consequently decided to send Satrapi to live at a boarding house run by nuns, a home which did not also last very long because of Satrapi’s rebellious nature.

From the outset, she did not endure the nun accusing her people of “having no education” (Satrapi 177). Unable to suppress her anger, Satrapi rejects the nun’s accusation of her people, saying “[It’s] true what they say about you, too. You were all prostitutes before coming nuns” (Satrapi 177). Even when Satrapi gets a safe home with the mother of her friend Julie, she finds it difficult to accustom herself to the Western way that teenagers treat their parents. In responding to Julie’s attitude when she slammed the door close as if ignoring her mother, Satrapi mentions, “[In] my culture, parents were sacred. We at least owed them an answer” (Satrapi 180).

These positive sentiments about Iran go to the wayside, however, the more she tries to fit into Western culture, and therefore loses a certain sense of her identity, temporarily sacrificing even the positive aspects of her Iranian, Islamic, and cultural
traditions. For instance, in the middle panel at the bottom of page 212, Satrapi depicts her younger self, talking with Enrique, a high school classmate with whom she forms a brief romantic relationship. In this panel, Satrapi shows a readiness to lose her virginity with Enrique even though she knows it will have permanent consequences: “[But] this night was different. I felt ready to lose my innocence. And too bad if no Iranian ever marries me. I live in Europe and I will marry a European” (Satrapi 212). Even though she ends up not having sex with Enrique, Satrapi shows how, in the service of fitting in, she tries to replace one set of values for another, wholesale. As Satrapi notes in a textbox: “The harder I tried to assimilate, the more I had the feeling that I was distancing myself from my culture, betraying my parents and my origins, that I was playing a game by somebody else’s rules….Each telephone call from my parents reminded me of my cowardice and my betrayal. I was at once happy to hear their voices and ashamed to talk to them” (Satrapi 193).

Satrapi’s attempts to assimilate in the host home contradict with the principles she developed as a child in her home of origin. From the excerpts above, it is clear that a conflict takes place within herself; if she wants to fit in the host home, she comes to believe that she must sacrifice the principles she developed in her home of origin. Another example of this phenomenon involves Satrapi’s first romantic relationship with an Austrian classmate, Markus, who not only treats her in an abusive and oppressive way by encouraging her to become a drug user and drug dealer and ultimately cheating on her. This set of actions surprises Satrapi herself, who comes to feel disassociated from her rebellious, intellectual, and spiritual younger, “Eastern” self. Her willingness to obliterate her earlier self makes her as an easy mark, a person with a complete submissive and passive character. In order to demonstrate the level of sacrifice she offered, Satrapi
depicts herself in a very horrible image, being transformed from a liberal teenager into a drug dealer. In the panel at the bottom of page 222, Satrapi looks hardened and puffs the smoke of a cigarette angrily. She also looks matured physically with some wrinkles on her face, thus pointing to the hard times she experiences in her host home. However, in the textbox, she explains that she has done all this to make her boyfriend, Marcus, proud of her:

Markus was proud of me. So proud that he told the whole school that his girlfriend had contacts with the Café Camera. This is how, for love, I began my career as a drug dealer. Hadn’t I followed mother’s advice? To give the best of myself? I was no longer a simple junkie, but my school’s official dealer. (Satrapi 222)

It is evident that assimilation, for Satrapi, becomes a symptom of “betrayal” i.e., she feels as if she betrays her home of origin and, in the process, loses her national identity. This becomes clear when she comments that, “I felt guilty that whenever there was news about Iran, I changed the channel” (Satrapi 194). Even worse, she accordingly attempts to deny her nationality by pretending that she is French rather than Iranian in order to be accepted by the other teens at her school. This situation is depicted in the panel on the top of page 197. In this panel, Satrapi looks very scary with her face covering almost the first quarter of the panel, with her mouth open wide as she yells at three of her friends who shrink in the corner of the couch. This image shows Satrapi’s inability to fit in a company that depreciates her and devalues her country, thus making Satrapi respond in a very powerful way “[You] are going to shut up or I am going to make you! I am Iranian and proud of it!” (Satrapi 197, emphasis original).
To conclude this section about Satrapi’s experiences in her host home, it is noticeable that none of relations Satrapi encounters end up being useful in helping her to integrate her Iranian and her European selves. The host home ends up being as violent and as unwelcoming as her home of origin. When she feels she could no longer survive and or fit in Austria, she reaches the conclusion that she “needed so badly to go home” (245) in order to get away from what she comes to see as a materialistic society that always depicts her as “other” and “alien.” In short, because Satrapi’s host home did not live up to her ideals, she was unable to discover a positive way to integrate her Iranian and European identities, so like Ahmed, she returned home hoping to find herself.

In spite of her decision to leave the host home and come back to her home of origin, I argue that through her host home she was able to create an intermediary space that enabled her to test out the West, develop a feminist perspective, and cultivate herself. As she recounts, “[Luckily], I had benefited enough from a solid education to never drift too far. It was the end of my last year. I was going to take the French Baccalaureate” (Satrapi 223). She, like Ahmed, healed her traumas by reading and by responding positively to feminist discourse but she failed to establish successful relationships with many Westerners, just like Salbi.

Satrapi’s education in the host home had enriched her experience with much intellectual guidance and critical thinking that eventually enabled her to start thinking of ways to liberate herself, as a woman, from the domination of patriarchal societies. In this regard, she benefited from the art of drawing as she started drawing different styles in her host homes rather than always drawing veiled teachers. Additionally, her ability to draw sarcastic caricatures gave her a sort of “goodwill” in front of her friends (165). She also benefited from extensively reading literary feminist books that celebrated women’s
rebellious thoughts. She was convinced that she had to understand everything that evolved around her especially those ideas that related to herself as a woman, "[To] educate myself, I had to understand everything, starting with myself, me, Marji, The woman. So, I threw myself into reading my mother’s favorite book" (Satrapi 175), Simone De Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* in which De Beauvoir explains the ways oppressed women could change their lives by changing their prototypes of thinking and also by confronting the patriarchal authoritarian culture.

Satrapi’s Return to her Home of Origin

When she returns to her home of origin hoping to find herself, Satrapi believes that her experience in the West weighs her down, making her feel isolated, lonely, and depressed. The Western posters in her room always remind her of the horrible life in Austria which she tries to erase from her memory. However, upon settling back into her parents’ home, she finally has the time to notice the sociopolitical changes that have taken place in Iran at the conclusion of the Iran-Iraq War. As she comes to wander in the streets of her home of origin, she notices that all aspects of the regime’s chauvinistic symptoms are spread everywhere. For example, she notices that all the streets’ names have been changed to those of religious and national martyrs. This, among other symptoms, leads her to believe that she has been rescued from a physical homelessness in Austria only to fall into a psychological homelessness in Iran, where, once again, she feels she is unable to fit in her home of origin with its new religious patterns of thought.

At her home of origin, she is confronted with identity confusion, being unable to come up with a true self-understanding, leading her to reach the conclusion that she is “nothing.” This makes her decide to commit suicide, but when her attempt fails she recognizes that she is not “…made to die” (Satrapi 272). At this point, she starts “trying
on” different identities through which she hopes to solve her crisis. She then begins to change her physical appearance so as to become a sophisticated woman, ending up as an aerobics instructor, a job that allows her to forget her emotional pain because she is always so exhausted.

Interestingly, like Salbi, Satrapi tries to forge an escape of sorts by becoming a faithful wife, in this case, through establishing a romantic relationship with Reza, a soldier who had fought in the Iran-Iraq War. On page 279, Satrapi shows how she and Reza differ, and how she hopes that what she feels to be his positive qualities will rub off onto her. However, because she ends up marrying him not for who he is, but for what he represents. Additionally, her marriage to Reza seems to fulfill her wish to establish a safe home in the conventional sense, but not in the ideational and spiritual sense, and eventually, she again comes to feel imprisoned. Here, I need to focus on the point that all of the memoirists in this study failed in their first marriage experiences, thus indicating that no one else could, in the end, “solve” their identity crises.

Satrapi’s Spiritual Artistic Home

Like Ahmed and Salbi, in order to feel truly self-actualized, Satrapi ends up developing an imagined artistic space that enables her to sustain herself, to develop a feminist identity, and to rebel against the fanatic religious extremism in her home of origin. However, at this point, I can notice a slight difference between Ahmed, Salbi and Satrapi. For Ahmed and Salbi, it was hard to create their imagined spiritual spaces while they were living in their homes of origin, considering home as only belonging to the regime. For Satrapi, in comparison, she was able to create part of her own imagined space in her home of origin, thus indicating that women could enact change everywhere they go. This, in fact, represents the strength that exists in herself and posits a role model
for other oppressed women who may not have the ability to leave their own homes of origin to rebel and create their own identities. Recognizing that she would not be able to erase the traditionalist mentality of the Iranian people, she is convinced that it is only by drawing and by studying the graphic art and illustration that she would be able to act and enact “change.” After her failure to establish and/or construct a solid home in the West and after her disappointing experiences after returning to Iran, Satrapi is able to create her own artistic imagined home.

By virtue of the art of drawing, she was the one who thoughtfully argued about the uselessness of having a long veil during drawing classes because it would slow the progress of female students. She was accordingly chosen to imagine the uniform that students should wear at college; she imagined a dress with a short headscarf and a wide trouser, a change, although very slight, but she considered as a revolt.

Additionally, one of the merits Satrapi gained from the art of drawing and illustration was that these illustrations always placed Satrapi in the lead. They enabled her to develop a sense of dignity at the personal level and a sense of integrity at the communal level. When the Head of Visual Department asks her, along with her husband Reza, to create the plans for a theme park in Tehran, based on the Iranian mythological heroes, Satrapi comes into her own design and finds sustenance through a reconnection with cultural myths. The project she designs is an equivalent to Disney Land and proves to become very successful. In developing that project, Satrapi’s idea was that she wanted to create a Middle Eastern theme park that celebrated her culture and traditions rather than to create a park whose patterns and motives were all derived from the West.

This artistic home that she developed through self-study and university coursework enabled her to change and act. One of the useful outputs for her artistic
home was the seeds for the novel that would become *Persepolis*. I would argue that *Persepolis* became a source for Satrapi’s artistic views through which she could express her own self, rebel against political oppression, work through her alienating experiences, and change the stereotypical representation of the Iranian women in the world.

It is important to notice that it was only by the development of an imagined artistic home Satrapi was able to view Reza as more than just a solution to her identity crisis. They had many conflicts previously because of their conflicting perspectives. However, only by the artistic home they were able to forget their conflicts, “[from] June 1993 to January 1994, we [Satrapi and Reza] were so busy that we didn’t even fight once” (Satrapi 328). Ironically, their reconciliation of sorts ends up leading to their mutual decision to divorce and to make better lives for themselves.

Like Salbi, Satrapi embraced the world of practicality, but like Ahmed, she grounded that world in an intellectual tradition. Not only did she rebel and challenge the authoritarian patriarchal culture in her home of origin, but she succeeded in becoming an artistic voice who reflects the worries and concerns of oppressed women in Iran. To achieve that, she traveled to France in 1994, where she created much change and expressed her feminist ideas courageously. In France, as well as in the West, *Persepolis* has begun to be taught in the curricula at in high schools and universities. The rationale behind this move is to give students a better understanding of the Middle Eastern cultural, religious, and political practices by listening directly to a liberal Middle Easterner’s point of view (Costantino 433).

Conclusion

Throughout Satrapi’s journeys, back and forth, she hoped to create an artistic home of her own, a world that would take her out of the extremist home of origin and the
unwelcoming host home(s). Like Ahmed and Salbi, she healed herself from the traumas and alienating experiences in and outside her home of origin by self-study and reading literature.

Escaping from the confusion she faced at the host home, Satrapi was confronted with the Iranian Eastern and traditional mentality that considered her as Westernized and for her Iranian friends as “whore.” Satrapi criticized that mentality by showing that even though people might appear modern and liberal but deep within they were traditionalists. I think that Satrapi has done a great job in showing how people themselves acquire the colonized mentality. So, this might explain Satrapi’s last statement in Persepolis when she stated, “freedom had a price” (Satrapi 341). At this point, she points to the hard life she had in her home of origin and in the host home. For her, the Western mentality, despite some of its adverse consequences on her, enabled her speak up her mind, but, in the meantime, she had to sacrifice her family and home. When she traveled to France, she mentions, “[The] goodbyes were much less painful than ten years when I embarked for Austria: there was no longer a war, I was no longer a child, my mother didn’t faint and my grandma was there, happily” (Satrapi 341).
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In the aftermath of the September 11th attacks, political situations worsened, thus making life in the West hard for the immigrant women authors featured in this study, causing them to call into question the concept of feeling “at home.” Amidst this highly charged environment, Arab-American and Middle Eastern women authors, among others, sought to fight for their own feminist rights, change their stereotypical image in the West, and create their own worlds.

To achieve their own feminist ambitions, Ahmed, Salbi, and Satrapi opted to write memoirs, which they thought of as being more flexible, a genre that would be the best means to express themselves because it would enable them to deal with real life situations rather than fictive ones. Additionally, through memoirs, women authors began to search for “uniqueness” and “self-representation,” so that other bicultural women could read and learn from their experiences.

My study examined three memoirs written by two Arab-American authors and one Middle Eastern women author (memoirists) during their travel from their “homes of origin” into their “host homes” in the West. The motives for their journeys and or escapes varied, but the most significant reasons were to seek other homes and /or spaces that would sustain them and make them feel “at home.” In this study, I highlighted the ways in which these memoirists tried to define the concept “home” along with some other matters of identity. Unlike other studies that have examined only two kinds of homes when describing the journeys of some immigrant women authors performed from their homes of origin into the west, I came to the conclusion that contemporary Arab-American and Middle Eastern memoirists dealt with three kinds of homes: homes of
origin, host homes, and imagined artistic homes. I examined these kinds of homes as they were presented by Leila Ahmed’s *A Border Passage*, Zainab Salbi’s *Between Two Worlds*, and Marjane Satrapi’s *The Complete Persepolis*.

A major commonality among all the three memoirists is their inability to establish a safe home and/or to feel “at home” as they remained living in their homes of origin; instead their homes of origin functioned as sources of violence, oppression, crisis, and internal displacement. Immigrant women authors have depicted their homes of origin as prisons where they could not act, rebel, or change. In effect, they pinned their hopes on the West as a space where they could freely act and think, away from social, religious, and traditional obstacles. During their journeys in the West, which they chose to be their host homes, life there did not emerge to the high expectations they had in mind. They felt trapped between two different cultures; weighed down with alienation, separation, and disillusionment; they become targets of prejudice, and, most importantly, were always seen as outsiders and alien others.

The major contribution of the present study is the claim that after the memoirists in question became disillusioned with the host homes or engaged in repeated journeys from the West to the Middle East and back, they created their own imaginary spaces that sustained them by enabling them to feel “at home.” Most importantly, these imagined homes enabled memoirists to develop feminist perspectives and/or identities, to break their silence, and to change their status as perceived stereotypes in the West. By writing these memoirs, Ahmed, Salbi, and Satrapi have become voices for women who are or who were oppressed in an authoritarian patriarchal culture, women who were less educationally and economically blessed, women who were religiously oppressed, and women who were war survivors.
In Ahmed’s *A Border Passage*, Ahmed physically escaped her home of origin simply because it did not provide her with the protection and security people expect at home. She was denied a passport because of her father’s oppositional stance against the regime of Nasser. She struggled to create her own identity in a colonized world like that she experienced at her home of origin because of the colonized mentality that plagued her family and people there. Ahmed’s home of origin had never been a source of optimism for her academic and intellectual ambitions. She was deprived from pursuing an education that supports her cultural heritage. She figured that anywhere abroad might be a good place for her, but she eventually found that the West could not offer her the home to which she always aspired. All the homes that hosted Ahmed turned out to be depressing. At Girton, Cambridge, she was overburdened by many racist attitudes and also she understood that she could not feel “at home” in England simply because it was the colonial power that occupied her country and whose media waged wars on her culture, country, and political figures. In the US, her second host home, Ahmed’s experience was as hard and depressing as in England, especially when Ahmed approached American feminism. She had always been viewed as an Arab and a Muslim woman even within the circle of her fellow feminists.

At this point, Ahmed concluded that despite her depressing experiences in her host homes, these homes enriched her with a mediatory space that enabled her to create her own intellectual home. She was able to create a feminist space for herself by becoming a professor of women’s studies in religion at Harvard. Throughout that job, she was able to change the prevailing image about Arab and Muslim women by showing the Western observers the unseen side of these women; how they rebelled against the extreme restrictions of their authoritarian patriarchal culture therefore enjoying the
privileges granted to them through their understanding of what she called the “Islam of women.” By the virtue of that intellectual home, she was able to develop a special feminist identity that allowed her to challenge all the labels imposed on her identity, mainly being an Arab, an Egyptian, and a Muslim woman. One of the merits that intellectual home offered was that it helped her, as a representative and a voice for women who were economically and academically less fortunate, to adapt with the cultural displacements she experienced at the host homes. She was able to socialize with women who accepted and supported her in developing her ideology regarding fundamental Islam, and, most importantly, finding a community of women that could provide her with more intellect by mingling with the American and Western feminist movements.

In Salbi’s Between Two Worlds, the case was very similar to that of Ahmed, as their homes of origin presented roadblocks to their desires to achieve their feminist ambitions. Both explicitly expressed their willingness to escape their countries of origin and to travel in search of healthier environments in the West where they could work. Salbi realized that to achieve all her feminist aspirations in helping war torn women would be almost impossible if she remained in Iraq.

However, like the imaginary intellectual home which Ahmed established for herself and for Arab and Muslim women in America, Salbi was able to develop a spiritual, yet practical home like that of the utopian “women’s village” which her mother along with her aunts and other women had dreamed of establishing. This home was Women for Women International in which she created a social network of women all over the world, whether sponsors or war survivors, who could communicate and share their own experiences.
Finally, in *Persepolis*, Satrapi was able to create an imaginary artistic home for herself that enabled her to challenge and rebel against all the chauvinistic restrictions imposed by the new Revolution under the name of Islam. In fact, as I argued previously, her memoir itself has become her own artistic home in which she was able to disseminate all her ideals and rebellious ideas to the whole world, explaining the rationale of her book through simple black and white illustrations. This imaginary artistic home has helped with changing the image about her home of origin, as belonging to the “axis of evil.” By the virtue of this home, she urged the world to not view her home of origin as belonging to that circle; there were people who would like to change, like her. Like Ahmed and Salbi, Satrapi was unable to develop her feminist identity in her home of origin because of her rebellious nature. Her experience in the West, Austria, was moving and sympathetic, but throughout that experience she learned how to heal and sustain oneself. I concluded that these memoirists valued imaginary spaces, intellectual, practical and artistic homes, which helped them to alleviate their increasing sense of estrangement and dislocation whether in their homes of origin or in their host homes. This consequently enabled these memoirists to build up better identities instead of their fragmented identities that they gained in their homes of origin. These memoirs, accordingly, have become models or guidelines for other women and a symbol of self-creation.

It is noteworthy to mention that during the process of writing my dissertation, the homes of origin of Ahmed, Salbi, and Satrapi had witnessed some revolts against the corruption of their regimes. The great peaceful weapon that played a great role in those revolutions was Facebook, which enabled all intellectuals to meet, organize, and gather the public. So, to promote the precious value of these memoirs, which I think could be as influential as Facebook once promoted, these memoirs should be disseminated among
students in the countries where these memoirs had taken place, especially after the success of some of these revolutions which were led by the intellectuals. Once disseminated among students, these memoirs would unveil the truth about many historical and religious misunderstandings because they represent real-life experiences of intellectual whose achievements would help all people once appropriately circulated.
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Leila Ahmed was born in Cairo in 1940 and according to Donna Seaman (1999) she was born in Cairo’s Upper class in Egypt. She is the daughter of Abdel Aziz and Iqbal (Radi) Ahmed. She earned her undergraduate (1961) and graduate (Master in 1966 and the PhD in 1971) from the University of Cambridge with honors. Now, she is a professor of Women’s Studies and Religion at the Harvard University (Contemporary Authors Online 2002).

Ahmed’s major work of *A Border Passage* (1999) is indicative that she was brought up in an Islamic yet conservative environment. She comments on two kinds of Islam: the Islam of women and the Islam of men, which she understood as authoritative and only represent men’s patriarchal tendencies (Ahmed 120-21). In one review of her book, Donna Seaman explains how Ahmed questions matters of identity in her “gracefully written and deeply felt reflection on her Muslim childhood, Cambridge education, and life in U.S. California” (n.pag.). She also explains how Ahmed has been taught to value everything which is European; a thing that doesn’t intrigue the leaders of the revolution lead by Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1952. Seaman also pointed to Ahmed’s other work, *Women and Gender in Islam* (1992), which, presumably, has led to the evolution of her book *A Border Passage*. In fact, both works have apparently motivated Ahmed to investigate the reasons for the gap between the male and female in Islam.

Zainab Salbi

Zainab Salbi is an Arab-American activist who was born in Iraq in 1968. She witnessed the Iraq-Iran war from 1980 to 1988 and wrote her first memoir in light of the
political, military, and social conditions she experienced herself. She fled to the United States of America in an attempt to escape the tyranny of the former Iraqi regime, even though her father used to be the president’s personal pilot. In 1990, her parents arranged for her to marry a rich man in the United States in the hope of escaping the tyranny of the political Regime of Saddam Hussein, a marriage which ended up shortly because her husband abused her more than Saddam Hussein thus leading her to get divorced (*Weekend all things considered* 2007). In 1993, she got married to Amjad Atallah, the cofounder of Women for Women International (WFWI). She later got her bachelor’s degree from George Mason University in 1996 and got her master’s degree from London School of Economics and Political Science in 2001. Currently she is the president of the Women for Women International (*Contemporary Authors Online* 2007).

Like many other Arab-American feminists, Salbi have absorbed the American ideology in writing about their identity and other matters of displacement and alienation, a feeling that equipped her writing with a source of empowerment and affiliation. Her memoir *Between Two Worlds: Escape from Tyranny: Growing up in the Shadow of Saddam* (2003) is a useful example for her writing about forging an identity and her struggle with searching for a true home to fit in. In the memoir, Salbi searches to “define herself and to understand how the world around her defines her as a woman, a [Shii] Muslim, and as an Arab” (Salbi 1999). Eventually, one can infer how Salbi’s memoir proves that she has changed; she turns into a very successful political figure that is capable of reshaping her own identity, helping other victims of war, and creating a special spiritual home for herself.
Marjane Satrapi

She is an Iranian-French comic author who was born in Rasht, Iran, in 1969. She attended the Lycée Français in Tehran, Iran. Satrapi studied illustration at Strasbourg, France, a major that taught her a lot about the art of the unsaid; by virtue of this art she was able to distinguish herself from other writers and novelists; she was able to say whatever they were unable to say. Her academic efforts were eventually culminated by writing her personal experience in Iran as she grew up during the Islamic revolution and the Iraqi-Iranian war in the 1970s. She sought to document her experience in a memoir that she collected in a comic-book series called The Complete Persepolis. This book was first published in France in 2000. It was translated into many languages, and later collected into two “book-length volumes in English Translation”. This book earned two awards in 2004: Alex Award and Booklist Top Ten Graphic Novels designation (Contemporary authors on line n.pag.).

Like other Arab-American and Middle Eastern memoirists, Satrapi enjoyed a very distinguished childhood. She was born into a progressive and liberal family that provided her with a healthy environment which enabled her to create a special yet rebellious identity. Her maternal grandfather was the son of Nasreddine Shah, the last Emperor of Iran. She was well-cultivated especially in politics; while her classmates were used to reading fairy tales, she spent most of her time reading cartoons about Marxism (Contemporary Authors Online n.pag.).

After the Shah had been overthrown in 1979, Iran was ruled by a stricter regime. It falls under the hold of religious fundamental group and Ayatollahs who changed people’s lives into ‘prisons’, even inside their homes. Very strict religious teachings were spread amidst people; women had to wear the veil, there was no more co-education as
schools were separated by gender, and the legal age at which girls could marry became 9 years only. Under such political and religious chaotic conditions, Satrapi were unable to remain in her home of origin because she had already developed a very rebellious personality. She stood up for her rights as a human being and opposed all the strict regulations imposed by her authoritarian, patriarchal culture. She, for example, did not accept being silent anymore and hit the school principal when she attempted to take her jewelry. This incident, among many more, has created a sense of rebelliousness in Satrapi, thus making her parents fearing her future in Iran and thus sending her to Vienna at the age of 14. After her life in Austria came to an impasse, she decided to come back and continue her education in Tehran (Contemporary Authors Online n.pag.).