Negotiating Generational Conflict and Identity Formation as a Way to Self Actualization in Contemporary Arab American Women's Literature

Hassan Ali Abdullah Al-Momani

Western Michigan University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/dissertations

Recommended Citation
https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/dissertations/335

This Dissertation-Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate College at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact maira.bundza@wmich.edu.
NEGOTIATING GENERATIONAL CONFLICT AND IDENTITY FORMATION AS A WAY TO SELF-ACTUALIZATION IN CONTEMPORARY ARAB AMERICAN WOMEN’S LITERATURE

by

Hassan Ali Abdullah Al-Momani

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 Athene Tarbox, Ph.D.

Western Michigan University
Kalamazoo, Michigan
August 2011
NEGOTIATING GENERATIONAL CONFLICT AND IDENTITY FORMATION AS A WAY TO SELF-ACTUALIZATION IN CONTEMPORARY ARAB AMERICAN WOMEN’S LITERATURE

Hassan Ali Abdullah Al-Momani, Ph.D.

Western Michigan University, 2011

This study focuses on identity formation in three contemporary Arab American women’s novels: Alicia Erian’s *Towelhead*, a text written specifically for young adults, Laila Halaby’s *West of the Jordan*, a novel that has been read and embraced by Arab American young adults, and Evelyn Shakir’s *Remember Me to Lebanon*, a text that features a number of Arab American young adult protagonists. Central to my project is the question of how Arab American female protagonists negotiate a space for themselves within the power structure of their families and their communities in order to forge bi-cultural identities.

The first and second chapters present background information on Arab American immigration history and culture, as well as a discussion of the social problems faced by first and second generation Arab American in the post-September 11th era. The third chapter sheds light on the reasons that many contemporary Arab American women writers have chosen to depict female adolescence with a focus on young women’s negotiation of generational conflict and identity formation. In the fourth chapter, I consider how self-actualization functions through identity formation in Evelyn Shakir’s *Remember Me to Lebanon* and Laila Halaby’s *West of the Jordan*. My goal is to clarify how the protagonists build their autonomy, independence, and self-esteem, decide to live an unconventional life, to fulfill their aspirations, and to
realize their potential through developing negotiation skills with the power structures that surround them. In other words, those protagonists who develop negotiation skills are most likely to achieve self-actualization. In the fifth chapter, I extend my analysis to Alicia Erian’s *Towelhead*, a text that has been classified as a “crossover” – it has been labeled both a mainstream text and a text within the canon of YA literature – paying particular attention to the ways a shift in audience alters the text’s narrative structure and focus. I also speculate on the reasons that Erian, unlike Shakir or Halaby, depicts secondary characters who are non-Arab.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First of all, I would like to record my gratitude to Dr. Gwen Tarbox for her supervision, advice, invaluable guidance, helpful criticism, and stimulating comments from the very early stage of this research as well as giving me extraordinary experiences throughout the work. Above all and the most needed, she has provided me unflinching encouragement and support in various ways. Her thoughts have inspired and enriched my growth as a student and researcher. I am greatly indebted to her more than she knows.

My thanks and appreciation should also go to Dr. Allen Webb, whose support, help, valuable remarks and insightful suggestions are greatly appreciated. Also, I want to extend my thanks to the members of the Supervisory Committee, Dr. Mustafa Mirzeler, and Dr. Lance Weldy for their valuable remarks and criticism.

My sincere thanks go to the chairman and the faculty members in the Department of English Language and Literature at Western Michigan University who have exerted great efforts in teaching and guiding me from the very beginning to the final stage of this dissertation.

Thanks are also due to the Writing Center director Kim Ballard and to the director and staff members of Technical Services Department at Waldo Library for their encouragement, help, and support.
Finally, words fail me to express my appreciation to my wife whose dedication, love, encouragement, patience, support, and confidence in me, has taken the load off my shoulder. Therefore, I am greatly endowed with her. My deepest love should go to my beloved daughters Jana and Bushra whose existence in my life makes me more optimistic and happier. My parents, brother, and sisters in Jordan deserve special mention for their inseparable support, encouragement, and prayers.

Finally, I would like to thank everybody who was important to the successful realization of the dissertation, as well as expressing my apology that I could not mention personally one by one.

Hassan Ali Abdullah Al-Momani
## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER ONE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER TWO</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BACKGROUND ON ARAB AMERICAN IMMIGRATION AND CULTURE</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER THREE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ARAB AMERICAN WOMEN WRITERS</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER FOUR</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEGOTIATION AND SELF-ACTUALIZATION IN SHAKIR’S <em>REMEMBER ME TO LEBANON</em></td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AND HALABY’S <em>WEST OF THE JORDAN</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER FIVE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEGOTIATION AND SELF-ACTUALIZATION IN ALICIA ERIAN’S <em>TOWELHEAD</em></td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In America my name sounds like someone throwing up or falling off a bicycle. If they can get the first part of it right, the “Kha” part, it comes out like clearing your throat after eating ice-cream. Usually they say kadeeja, though, which sounds clattering clumsy. It never comes out my mother’s soft way; she makes it sound almost pretty. (36)


The quotation that begins this introduction is taken from Halaby’s *West of the Jordan*, and reflects challenges Arab American young adults face regarding identity construction, as portrayed in contemporary Arab American women’s literature. The quote depicts the way that Khadija’s name reflects her dislocation between Arab and American cultures. She is uncomfortable about her name, especially the letters “kh,” which are hard for most Americans to pronounce; her name makes her feel different from her peers and unable to negotiate a satisfying sense of an integrated identity. Reflecting further on her name, she thinks: “I am sure the original Khadija was very nice and that’s why Prophet Muhammad married her and why my father gave me her name, but I am also sure that if the original Khadija went to school in America that she would hate her name just as much as I do” (36). Later, she tries to replace her name with the name “Diana” in front of her American friends in order to erase her position in-between cultures and her feelings of displaced identity.

Khadija’s second problem lies in her parents’ treatment of her. She is berated by her mother, a strict and narrow-minded moral instructor, who, as Khadija says, only talks
“about house things and taking-care-of-your brothers’ things, and sometimes don’t-do-that-or-you’ll-never-marry things” (37). Khadija’s mother wants her to be fully Arab and to be bounded within Arab traditions. Khadija tells her mother of her perceived identity as an Arab American: “Ma, I can’t speak Arabic right, I’ve never even been there, and I don’t like all of those dancing par-daughter” (74). However, her mother insists that Khadija should be fully an Arab: “No! No daughter of mine is American” (74), she declares, and she warns her against taking part in any “shameful behaviors” against her Arab culture, such as dating: “Palestinian women should be virgins when they marry, their parents expect this as do most of their potential spouses” (94).

Similarly, Khadija’s father is a source of suffering, confusion, and fear. His disappointment at failing to fulfill his dreams in America affects Khadija. He is a weak character who resorts to alcoholism and abusive acts against his daughter to work out his frustration against America, which, as the narrator puts it, “has taken [his] dreams that used to float like those giant balloons, and filled them with sand” (37). He is like the father of the young Korean American girl, Young Ju, in An Na’s YA novel A Step from Heaven (2002), whose violence against his wife and his children is related to his inability to achieve his goals as an immigrant to the US. Even Khadija’s reaction against her drunken father when he hits her brother is similar to Young Ju’s, when she dials 911, in that both girls utilize information they have learned in the US to solve family problems. As Khadija relates, “I do what I have never done. I run to the phone and dial 911 like they say to do in school” (Halaby 207). This reaction is considered by her parents to be a betrayal of cultural mores, and Khadija knows that she will pay a price: “scary is what is
going to happen to us until Ma comes home. Scary is what Ma will do and if they’ll say it’s my fault” (208).

Furthermore, Khadija’s friendship with an American friend Patricia, which is met by her parents’ disapproval, depicts how she is torn between two worlds. As she says about Patricia’s invitation to attend a party: “I didn’t argue. I knew that was what [Ma] was going to say. And even if she has said yes, Baba would probably have hit me just for asking” (173).

The issues raised in Halaby’s text are not unique; they characterize trends in contemporary Arab American women’s literature that I plan to explore in my dissertation. In order to address the complex issues surrounding hyphenated identities and generational conflict, I will discuss the origins of Arab American immigration and the impact of various political and cultural changes that have impacted the Arab American community over the last two centuries.

The term “Arab” refers to persons from the 22 North African and Middle Eastern member states of the Arab League which include: Algeria, Bahrain, Comoros Islands, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen (Majaj 3). As Al-Hazza and Bucher note, “although living in different countries and regions with unique and distinctive cultures, these Arabs are bound by an Arab identity that is based on a common language and some shared traditions, such as mores and values of right and wrong, standards of public behavior, music, marriage rituals, and humor” (5,6).
Most scholars state that the definition of the term “Arab” is based on the Arabic language Arabs speak, the geographical area they live in which is located in the Middle East and North Africa, the culture, traditions, values and history they share (Majaj 3; Diliberto 33; Ahmad 1). Additionally, Arabs belong to the Semitic group of the Arabian Peninsula (Al-Hazza and Bucher 5; Kadi xvii, xviii; Nardi 20; Boosahda 1). Although there is a disagreement among scholars on the idea that Arabs is a race, most of them agree that Arabs are different from other groups living in the Middle East, such as Kurds, Berbers, Armenians, Persians, and Turks (Majaj 3; Al-Hazza and Bucher 6; Diliberto 33). They agree on the diversity of Arabs, a group of different nationalities and origins, customs and traditions, language dialects, religious beliefs including Christian Arabs, Druze Arabs, and Jewish Arabs, and the widely varied physical features of Arabs (Majaj 3; Hakim-Larson et al. 301; El-Farra 1; Amer and Hovey 336; Shora 19; Boosahda 2). Although there is a strong connection between the term “Arab” and Islam because of the emergence of Islam in Arabian Peninsula and because the majority of Arabs are Muslims, and Arabic is the sacred language of the Holy book Qura’an, the scholars highlight the fact that not every Arab is Muslim and not every Muslim is an Arab because Arabs belong to different religious beliefs (Majaj 3; Diliberto 33; Amer and Hovey 336; Britto 853, 854; Shora 19, 24).

The term “Arab American” generally refers to “US citizens or residents who trace their ancestry to countries in the Middle East and share the heritage of a common language and culture” (Chelala 417). Although “Arab” is both a cultural and linguistic term used to describe people who share the Arab culture and Arabic language, Arab
Americans are further diversified by social class, religion, education, Arabic dialect, length of time in the U.S., and degree of acculturation” (Hazza and Bucher 6).

Although Arab Americans are diverse, given that they belong to different nationalities, traditions, customs, and religions, and have different acculturative experiences and various political tendencies, they share historical, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds. For many new immigrants, their immigration experience is influenced by the political situation in their homelands. Additionally, the number of Arab Americans is not known exactly because they are not given a special racial category in the American census.

Additionally, Arab American identity has been influenced by Arab Americans’ political and national awareness and their relationships with the political unrest in their homelands. In the early waves of immigration, Arab Americans were obliged to assimilate and integrate into American society in order to be accepted by it. But as their immigration number has increased and their diversity has become clear, Arab Americans feel that there is a need to establish their identity, especially after the Arab-Israeli conflict. Additionally, the political situation in the United States after the September 11th Acts has had a huge effect on Arab American identity formation, in which Arab Americans have felt that they need to show mainstream America that they are loyal to America, while maintaining links to their Arab origin. Some Arab Americans avoid using the identity label “Arab American” because of the association of Islam with Arabs, a matter which I will return to in the second chapter that focuses on Arab American history. Most importantly, Arab American identity reflects the diversity of this community, in which there are some groups who prefer to be labeled according to their religion and
country of origin, so we find the terms “Druze,” “Christians,” “Arab Muslim American,” “Egyptian American”...etc.

The first Arab Americans immigrants came to the United States from Lebanon and Syria in a series of waves. The first wave, or pre-world War II wave, consisted of village farmers or artisans who were relatively poor and less educated. Their hopes were to earn money and to make a living. In the post-World War II wave, Arab immigrants were more bilingual, politicized, educated, and nationalistic, and they benefited from the racial exclusion and the policy against communism in order to make alliances with the nations whose people were barred from immigrating to the U.S. Also the refugee policy permitted a significant number of Palestinians to emigrate to U.S. to escape the Arab-Israeli War in 1948.

From 1965 to 2000, new immigrants came to the U.S. under family reunification preferences, and there were some groups, particularly Egyptians, who came on professional visas. In the 1990s and early in the twenty-first century, large numbers of Iraqis, Somalis, and Sudanese came to the U.S. as refugees. In short, most Arab Americans immigrated to the U.S. in order to escape complex political situations in their countries and to find a new chance to build their future in America (Naff 25-35).

Additionally, Arab Americans were negatively influenced by the September 11 Acts which made them the target in the media, as they were cast as a threat to “the homeland.” Since the September 11 Acts, Arab Americans have faced prejudice, violence, US governmental policies which have targeted Muslims and Arabs and their community organizations, and “racial and ethnic discrimination associated with increased
psychological distress and anxiety which increased risk for adverse mental health outcomes, and poorer health status" (Padela and Heisler 284).

The term “Arab American Young Adults” refers to the Arab American teenagers who are caught between the older generation who look hopefully to them with the belief that they will produce a better future for themselves and their families, and many Americans who look at them with increasing levels of fear, aversion, and hostility. Arab American young adults are anxious about their future. They are influenced by American foreign policy that affects their countries of origin. Additionally, they suffer from school and workplace discrimination, warfare in their countries of origin, cultural misunderstanding, and a sense of multiple identities. Al-Hazza and Bucher describe the problems faced by Arab American young adults in this way:

Young adolescent Arab Americans or Arab immigrants may also face a conflict between personal identity and cultural identity. When young adolescents from cultures that place a high value on family loyalty come to the U.S. and try to adapt to the majority culture, they often have difficulties adjusting to the emphasis that Americans place on individual competence and competition. For example, Arab values stress the importance of family and religion, respect for elders, and the importance of family before self. Arab society is both collective and authoritarian with children expected to adhere to their parents’ and teachers’ expectations and regulations. Thus, in Arab cultures, the young adolescent identifies with the family and bases his or her self-esteem on family status and reputation and on support and approval from the family. Using an authoritarian style, many Arab parents emphasize obedience, restrict autonomy, and maintain control. Even at
school, when an Arab student encounters verbal, physical, or emotional abuse or aggression from an educator, he or she may assume that this is the normal role of a teacher and will not complain. As a result, many young Arab adolescents may have emotional and behavioral problems including depression and low self-esteem. (6, 7).

It is also important to note that Arab American literature serves as a reflection of the history of Arab American immigration waves and identity. From the genre’s early beginnings, Arab American writers such as Gibran Khalil Gibran try to preserve their Arab identity and assimilate into American society. They work on bridging the gaps between East and West in their writings. In all Arab American literature stages, Arab American writers have kept reflecting their connection and linkage with their countries of origin and have referenced their problems living in both Arab and American worlds. For the most part, their literature is a depiction of their problems and challenges related to identity.

There is a trend among contemporary Arab American women’s writers to write about the problems of Arab teens in America, related to their feelings of bicultural identity crisis, loss of homeland and traditions, and prejudices faced because of September 11 Acts. These writings depict the conflict of teenage immigrants as they find their cultural identity, and many of these characters reflect the suffering of Arab American teenagers who find themselves torn in their community because they do not feel the absolute sense of belonging to one society and culture, and they face the complexity of combining the Arab and American traditions into one cultural mould. Thus, the issue of bicultural identity and the inability of negotiation with the power
structure of families, traditions, and media are the main characteristic of contemporary Arab American women’s literature. As Lisa Majaj claims in her article entitled “Arab-American Literature: Origins and Developments”:

Stymied by the complexities of their mixed identities and the inability of those around them to understand that complexity, the protagonists struggle to find homes for themselves between Arab and American cultures. For both, issues of identity are played out in part through race, as they experience classifications such as “white” or “not white” as a form of violence. Arab-American authors increasingly demonstrate both the diversity of the Arab cultural roots on which they draw and the diverse ways in which these cultural roots play out in the U.S. For some, Arab-American literature will always be about the narrative of leaving behind one identity and acquiring a new one. For others, Arab-American literature takes its place on a global canvas, as one component of a worldwide Arab diaspora in which cultural ties can be reinvigorated. (7, 12).

The influence of the September 11 Acts and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq on contemporary Arab American women’s literature have been significant. Arab Americans have been portrayed in the media as dangerous outsiders and have suffered from racial and cultural prejudice. However, there is a special challenge facing Arab Americans and Arab immigrants which is “the perception of many Americans about their religion… following the rise of radical Islamic terrorists and 9/11, Arab Americans and Arab immigrants have often been the target of discrimination, as many Americans associate Islam with terrorism. Thus, children often tease Arab-Americans or Arab immigrant
young adolescents because of their foreign sounding names, traditional clothing, or practice of fasting during Ramadan” (Al-Hazza and Bucher 6).

Since the main texts I am focusing on in this dissertation are written by women writers, many of whom self-identify as feminists, I will also consider how these writers reflect the difficulties they face because of their feelings of gender discrimination along with their sense of possessing hybrid identities or hyphenated identities. Shakir, Halaby, and Erian depict the adult characters’ sense of being both Arab and American, yet being completely neither Arab nor American. As Abdelrazeq points out, “the writers resist both the East’s and the West’s perceptions of them. They resist both the East with its oppressive regimes as well as the West which sees them as domesticated and unenlightened other. They oppose American feminist discourse that looks at the Arab women’s problems such as the veil from the Western point of view” (2). Abdelrazeq further notes that most Arab American women writers disagree with those feminists who claim that the reason of Arab women’s oppression is based in religion; they insist that their problems come from patriarchal values which have complex social and political roots leading to the potential limiting of their agency (Abdelrazek 4).

Thus, Arab American feminist writers central to this study have struggled to correct the negative stereotypes about Arab Americans in general and about Arab American women and girls in particular by showing that Islamic religion does not always play a role in their oppression by Arab American men, and that many Arab American women are highly educated and politically oriented. Arab American feminists want to build a sense of solidarity with American feminists on the basis of mutual understanding and respect for Arab American women’s struggle and efforts to liberate themselves from
the patriarchal authority. Additionally, most Arab American feminists highlight the negative influence of September 11, the war on Iraq, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on their identity formation and on their diasporic experience. Arab American women are caught between the choice to assimilate into American society and to adhere to their Arab traditions and culture. In other words, they have a stronger challenge than do their male counterparts as they attempt to preserve their cultural values and traditions and to transfer these values to the coming generations because of their responsibility to raise their children and to assimilate into American society.

Most of the characters in contemporary Arab American women’s literature are young girls who search for and struggle to claim an Arab identity while trying not to be marginalized by American society. Arab American young girls are portrayed as deeply ambivalent characters who pose a series of questions regarding their hybrid identities: they wonder about the importance of “acculturation,” which is the adaptation process of immigrant populations in a new culture; they ask whether the adaptation to a new culture means losing oneself or giving up one’s own values.

In addition to confronting issues of identity, protagonists in contemporary Arab American women’s literature are shown to long for a sense of home – a place where they feel they truly belong. Because Arab American young girls have not any choice but to live in a virtual border zone, in the third place, in-between Arab and American cultures, they end up having the feelings of “other” and the “same,” and play the role of insiders and outsiders in the American society, thus linking them to previous “misfit” young, female characters such as Young Ju in An Na’s award-winning *A Step from Heaven*, who is marginalized for different reasons, but experiences a similar dislocation. However,
Arab American young adult protagonists differ from other protagonists depicted in contemporary US literature in that Arab American young adults have been profoundly influenced by the hugely negative effect of terrorist acts on the USA. Additionally, most contemporary Arab American women writers witnessed the effects of wars in the Middle East and Diaspora that shaped their identity and made them strongly connected to the conflict of the Middle East. Thus, all the previous effects have been reflected in the contemporary creative work of Arab American women.

Based on the characteristics of contemporary Arab American women’s literature, the main purpose of this study is to highlight generational conflict and identity formation processes in three contemporary Arab American women’s novels: Evelyn Shakir’s _Remember Me to Lebanon_, a text that features a number of Arab American young adult protagonists; Laila Halaby’s _West of the Jordan_, a novel that has been read and embraced by Arab American young adults; and Alicia Erian’s _Towelhead_, a text that has been classified both as a mainstream novel and as a YA literature text, depending upon the source. Central to my project is the question of how Arab American female protagonists negotiate a space for themselves within the power structure of their families and their communities in order to forge bi-cultural identities and to become self-actualized.

The first and second chapters present background information on Arab American immigration history and culture, as well as a discussion of the social problems faced by first and second generation Arab American in the post-September 11th era. The third chapter sheds light on the reasons that many contemporary Arab American women writers have chosen to depict female adolescence with a focus on young women’s negotiation of generational conflict and identity formation. In the fourth chapter, I use
consider how self-actualization functions through identity formation in Evelyn Shakir’s *Remember Me to Lebanon* and Laila Halaby’s *West of the Jordan*. My goal is to clarify how the protagonists tend to build their autonomy, independence, and self-esteem, to live an unconventional life, to fulfill their aspirations, and to realize their potential through developing negotiation skills with the power structures that surround them. In other words, those protagonists who develop negotiation skills are most likely to achieve self-actualization. In the fifth chapter, I extend my analysis to Alicia Erian’s *Towelhead*, a text that has been classified as a “crossover” — it has been labeled both a mainstream text and a text within the canon of YA literature — paying particular attention to the ways a shift in audience alters the text’s narrative structure and focus. I also speculate on the reasons that Erian, unlike Shakir or Halaby, depicts secondary characters who are non-Arab.

My selection of the primary texts in this study is based on the fact that all of these texts depict the protagonists’ struggles and negotiation with their family, peers, and Arab traditions in order to gain their sense of identity. For example, in Shakir’s *Remember Me to Lebanon*, the protagonist Rima counters her father’s authority to teach her Arab traditions. She discusses a well-known bedouin tale, “The Story of Ali,” with her father as an attempt to understand her identity influenced by American culture. In Halaby’s *West of the Jordan*, three of the four protagonists struggle with their parents who are attached to Arab traditions in order to define their cultural identity and their sense of belonging to either Arab or American identities. These protagonists suffer from a bicultural identity crisis as their parents want them to live according to Arab traditions and they desire to live the freedom of American life. In Erian’s *Towelhead*, the
protagonist Jasira struggles with her parents’ authority to suppress her sexuality and her sense of subjectivity and with the prejudice and racism against her from her classmates at school for being an Arab; the resolution to her conflicts is bridged by a group of non-Arab women, a development that I treat in depth and use as a contrast to the work of Shakir and Halaby.

Another reason for the selection of these primary texts is related to the protagonists’ feeling of being marginalized and discriminated against because of negative stereotypes of Arabs/Arab Americans, even though these protagonists realize that they have weak ties to the Arabic traditions and culture practices valued by their immediate and extended families. For example, Jasira in *Towelhead* and Khadija and Soraya in *West of the Jordan* are harassed for being Arabs, although these protagonists do not have a strong attachment to Arab culture. In other words, their struggle with negative media stereotypes about Arabs/Arab Americans is an attempt by them to prove their sense of being Americans. At the same time, Rima in *Remember Me to Lebanon* struggles with confusion between what she learns at school and what she learns at home; she feels free to express her subjectivity at school and is influenced by American culture, whereas she is restricted by her parents at home to behave according to Arab traditions.

I hope that my study will pave the way to a better understanding of Arab American young adults’ problems, especially the bicultural identity crises and the generational conflict from which most of them suffer. Given the fact that there are very few full-length studies of Arab American youth’s negotiation with their parents and their identity formation, I hope that my study will foster a dialogue in the larger academic community regarding these topics. Furthermore, there is a noticeable absence and
misunderstanding of Arab Americans and their culture in American educational curricula. The inclusion of texts such as *Towelhead* and other like it may provide a way for educators to counteract negative media images surrounding Arab Americans and to encourage the inclusion of Arab American literary texts in their teaching of literature.
CHAPTER TWO

BACKGROUND ON ARAB AMERICAN IMMIGRATION AND CULTURE

This chapter presents background information on Arab American history and culture, as well as a discussion of the social and cultural problems faced by first and second generation Arab Americans in the post-September 11th era. I pay particular attention to the diversity of the Arab American community, both in terms of country-of-origin, religious affiliation, and language. Given that contemporary Arab American literature has been written against the backdrop of these historical and cultural events and experiences, an overview of this nature will provide a solid foundation for the study that follows.

As mentioned in the introductory chapter, scholars define “Arab Americans” according to their ancestry from the Arab counties including Algeria, Bahrain, the Comoros Islands, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Mauritania, Oman, Palestine (historic Palestine or the present occupied Palestinian territories), Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen (Moradi and Hassan 418; Nigem 629; Salari 582; El-Sayed and Galea 2; Read 209; Ahmad 1,2; Chelala 417; Nardi 20, 21). Arab American immigrants began arriving in the United States from their countries of origin in the late nineteenth century (Ahmad 2; Mohamed 2; Abdulrahim and Baker 2098; Samhan 1).

The term “Arab” is related to a person “whose mother tongue is Arabic” (Kayyali xv), while the general definition of “Arab American” is related to the immigrants from Arabic-speaking countries. However, linking the definition of Arabs with Arabic
language complicates the definition of the term “Arab Americans” because many second and third generation Arab Americans do not speak Arabic. In addition, “the term Arab has also a strong association with Islamic culture and religion, and so some Christians from the Arab world do not consider themselves Arab.” However, Kayyali highlights the role of media in the United States which he claims has “contributed to a sense of communal identity as Arabs are grouped together, regardless of in-group distinctions” (xv).

Arab Americans are diverse in terms of their “cultural, linguistic backgrounds, political and religious beliefs, family structures and values and acculturation to Western society” (Ahmad 4). Additionally, the diversity among Arab Americans is also represented in their socioeconomic status, as “considerable differences in income and educational attainment exist between Arab American men and women and between the different ancestry groups” (Abdulrahim and Baker 2098). Thus, as Layton claims, the phrase Arab American “does not imply a single, unified identity. Arabs are Muslim, Christian, Jewish, or subscribe to no faith at all...these individuals come from vastly different countries and cultures. They may be urban or rural dwellers, religious or secular, modern or traditional” (7).

Salaita presents a comprehensive definition of Arab Americans that focuses on their diverse religious beliefs, residency, political tendencies, and race: Muslim (Shia and Sunni and Alawi and Isma’ili), Christian (Catholic and Orthodox, Anglican and Evangelical, and Mainline Protestant), Jewish (Orthodox and Conservative and Haredi and Reform), Druze, Bahai, dual citizens of Israel and twenty-two Arab nations, multi- and monolingual, progressives and conservatives, assimilationists and
nationalists, cosmopolitanists and pluralists, immigrants and fifth-generation Americans, wealthy and working-class, rural and urban, modern and traditional, religious and secular, White and Black, Latin American and Canadian....Sometimes Arab Americans are non-Arabs such as Circassians, Armenians, Berbers, Kurds, and Iranians. (1)

In regards to Arab American diversity in terms of religious affiliations, many scholars claim that the majority of Arab Americans are Christians; some studies indicate that as many as three quarters of Arab Americans are Christian and a quarter are Muslim (Ahmad 3; Cole 24; Read 209; Escher 2; Samhan 1; Amer and Hovey 337). This demographic data is explained by the fact that most of the early Arab immigrants to the United States were Christians who fled due to Ottoman oppression, assimilated into American society easily, and married individuals from other Christian ethnic groups (Salari 583). According to Samhan, “even though many Arab Christians have kept their Orthodox and Eastern Rite Church (Greek Catholic, Maronite, and Coptic) affiliations, which have helped to strengthen ethnic identification and certain ritual, their religious practices have not greatly distinguished them from the Euro-centric American culture” (2). Additionally, there are other Arab Christians called Chaldeans who are “a large subgroup of immigrants to the United States from the Middle East. They are Iraqi Catholic Christians who speak a dialect of Aramaic, although Arabic may be spoken as well” (Hakim-Larson et al. 302). Hakim-Larson et al. assert that the Chaldeans are classified as an Arab American group because of their shared culture with Arabs.

Taken together, the number of Arab and Chaldean Americans is estimated to be 3.5 million in the United States, with the largest population concentration in the Detroit area of southeast Michigan, as many 19th and 20th century immigrants sought
employment opportunities in the automobile industry (302). As far as religion is concerned, Salari estimates that there are “Protestants (12%), Catholics (42%), Orthodox groups (Syrian, Greek, and Coptic rites, 23%), and Muslims (23%)” (583).

Most recent Arab American immigrants – the ones who are featured in the media as appearing to represent the entire Arab American community – are Muslims whose own varied religious backgrounds have encouraged them to question the idea of easy assimilation (Samhan 2). Thus, Arab Americans are diverse in their ability and their willingness to acculturate and to assimilate into American society, depending upon their religious beliefs, their political orientation, and their geographic locations (Mourad and Carolan 179). As Horan observes, some Muslim immigrants from Arab regions may be “reluctant and unwilling to adapt to the American culture and society, and … [may be more likely to reject] America's core values due to barriers carried out through select sociocultural and sociopolitical variables” (Horan). Additionally, most contemporary Muslim immigrants are “more ethnically conscious than earlier Arab immigrants and not as affluent” (Salari 583). Thus, Arab Americans are diverse in their ability to assimilate into American culture.

Concerning the diversity of Arab Americans on the basis of their nationalities and origins, most Arab Americans trace their ethnic roots to five groups “including Lebanese (47%), Syrians (15%), Palestinians (6%), Egyptians (9%), and Iraqis (3%)” (Salari 582). Also, there are Arab Americans whose roots are Egyptian and Jordanian (Amer and Hovey 337; Samhan 4). The early Arab immigrants were originally Lebanese and Syrians, whereas from the 1950s, Arab Americans became more diverse in terms of their national origins. Michigan is one of the states that includes many diverse nationalities of
Arab Americans as “more than a third of Michigan’s Arab Americans have Lebanese ancestry; most of that population is Shi’a. (Shi’a refers to that part of the Islamic population who considers Ali, the fourth Islamic caliph, as the legitimate successor to the prophet Muhammad). Another third of the state’s Arab Americans are Iraqi, and many of those residents are Christian” (Cole 24). Additionally, Gold concurs that Arab Americans who live in Detroit are a diverse group which includes many nationalities and religious affiliations, such as “Lebanese Christians; Sunni and Shiite Muslims; Palestinians and Jordanians who are Catholic, Protestant, Greek Orthodox and Sunni Muslims; Eastern rite Catholic Chaldeans and Yemenis of different Muslim sects” (48).

Arab Americans are diverse in terms of their employment, as well: “seventy-two percent work in managerial, professional, technical, sales, or administrative jobs” (Salari 583). There are other Arab Americans who are engaged in “the wholesale and retail trades, many as urban or rural peddlers” (Bing-Canar and Zerkel 736). Additionally, Arab Americans are diverse regarding their educational background and level; early Arab immigrants who were Christians were less educated and more assimilated than the recent ones who are well-educated and more attached to their ethnic identity (Hakim-Larson et al. 303; Özdil 2).

Since the Gulf War, and especially since the September 11th Acts, many Arab Americans have chosen to use different identity labels in order to disassociate themselves from certain ethnic, national, political, social, and cultural markers that might potentially set them up for increased discrimination (Witteborn 559). Conversely, other Arab Americans have chosen to identify themselves as “Arab” when they talk with non-Arabs in order to challenge negative stereotypes about Arabs as terrorists (564). They want to
assert their Arab ethnicity, Arabic language, values, and their adherence to Islam by using this label (568). Some others identify themselves as “Arab American,” with the emphasis on American, when they are engaging in political and media situations where they fear that their identities will not be viewed as being credible in mainstream American society or when they have the desire to build a shared common ground between themselves and other American citizens, particularly after September 11, when the label “Arab” became an unsafe identity marker on its own (564, 565). Additionally, there are some Arab Americans classify themselves with the identity labels “Muslim,” “Druze,” and “Christian,” depending upon the social context.

In terms of national markers, there are some Arab Americans who identify themselves as “Palestinian” in order to talk about the social and political issues to those people who do not have negative stereotypes about them, picked up from U.S. media. Similarly, the people who identify themselves as “Iraqi” try to draw the attention to the political situation in their country and to express their status as “refugees” (Witteborn 570). There are some Arab Americans who identify themselves as “Lebanese” in order to differentiate themselves from “Arab” identity by presenting a different cultural, social, and political picture from the one in the Arab world, in which they “express … their identity with a non-Arab audience because they [are] proud of the democratic past of Lebanon” (566). Similarly, the Arab Americans who identify themselves as “Egyptians” try to “differentiate themselves ethnically from Arabs, based on the idea that Egypt was Arabized and Islamized…Some Egyptians highlighted this identity instead of a Muslim or Arab identity, as ‘Egyptian’ evoked more positive connotations in their opinion…such as history and mythic civilization” (566).
Ajrouch and Jamal have pointed out that Arab Americans are diverse in terms of their identification with white racial identification, as the early Arab Christian immigrants were more likely to identify themselves as “White” on a census, whereas recent Arab American immigrants who are Muslims have often chosen other minority groups on census documents (863; 864). Additionally, scholars have noted differences between Arab Muslim Americans and Arab Christian Americans regarding their attachment to Arab ethnic practices. For instance, Amer and Hovey observe that many Muslim Arab Americans show higher levels of attachment to their ethnic practices and religiosity than do their Arab Christian American counterparts who are more likely to desire assimilation (336). Thus, it is noted that Arab Muslim Americans have greater acculturation stress than Arab Christian immigrants because “some Arab values and practices conflict with those of the mainstream culture and thus increase chances for a person to be misunderstood or discriminated against” (343). Not surprisingly, Amer and Hovey note that older Arab American individuals are more engaged in their Arab ethnic practices than the younger ones. Similarly, Arab American females are more attached to their Arab ethnic traditions and religiosity than the males. This is due to the part that Arab American “women play in preserving and transmitting cultural and religious traditions” to their children (336).

The last feature of Arab American diversity that I wish to consider involves political tendencies and attitudes, as second-generation Arab Americans’ political participation is more consistent than that of the first generation (Alkhatib). According to Samhan, Arab Americans are divided politically among Republicans, Democrats, and independents (2), although the issue of the Middle East is important for all Arab
Americans. In recent elections, “Arab Americans exhibited considerable variability in the salience they assigned to Middle East issues when thinking about domestic politics” (Wald 1320). This variation may be due to the fact that Arab Americans have difficulty in developing a “strong sense of politicized ethnic identity” (1307) because of their different origins and the duration of their residency in the United States.

Although Arab Americans are a diverse group, demographics associated with it are difficult to pinpoint with precision because there has never been a special category given to Arab Americans on census documents (Ahmad 3; Read 209; Majaj 3; Salari 582). Nigem notes that until 1920 “all Arabs, Turks, Armenians, and other[s] were classified as ‘Turkey in Asia’ [in census records]. After 1920, the category ‘Syrian’ was added to accommodate the increase in the Syrian emigrants…non-Syrians were classified as ‘other Asians’ and North African Arabs as ‘other Africans’” (630). Nigem points out that until 1979, there was no accurate or official data about Arab Americans because The U.S. Census of Population and the Immigration and Naturalization statistics “did not clearly and directly identify this group” (630). Thus, the difficulty of identifying the accurate number of Arab Americans makes it impossible to specify exactly the diversity of Arab Americans in terms of their national origins, religious beliefs, and political tendencies.

As many scholars have observed, although Arab Americans are a diverse people, they have shared cultural characteristics, such as “their shared experiences of immigration, the central role of family, including extended family, respect for and duty to elders, prioritizing family ties over personal success, and the importance of religious faith” (Moradi and Hasan 419). Arab American culture is highly influenced by Islamic
teachings, as well as by similar teaching in the tenets of Orthodox Christianity. Most importantly, the culture of honor or “sharaf” is highly important, and it features in much of the literature that I will discuss in this study. Sharaf is defined as the idea that “the actions of an individual can bring shame to the entire family” (Ahmad 5). These actions include engaging in premarital sexual relationships between men and women, engaging in homosexual relationships, drinking alcohol, and depending on other family members when there is an ability to work and to be productive. Sometimes, seeking psychotherapy or mental health treatment is considered as a stigma or shameful behavior in Arab American culture, “resulting in the tendency for some people who suffer from psychological problems such as depression to have their conditions go untreated” (Ahmad 6; Mourad and Carolan 181; Aloud ii). It should be noted here that the culture of honor, “sharaf”, or shame, is mainly based on the social traditions of Arab American families, and religion does not play a role in constituting this cultural feature. Typically, when sharaf has been mentioned in the media, it has been linked to Islam, but this cultural feature extends to many sectors of the Arab American community, as is evidenced in the texts that I treat in this dissertation, which focus on individuals with Palestinian, Lebanese, and Egyptian backgrounds and with varying faiths.

As with most 20th and 21st century immigrants to the US, many Arab Americans emphasize the importance and centrality of family in their culture, especially as Arab American societies are “organized and governed by families or tribes, and the family remains an important institution” (Ahmad 7). Additionally, the extended family in Arab American culture is highly important for most Arab Americans, regardless of their religious and national identifications. In other words, “family unity, closeness, and
solidarity are valued over and above friendships and work life, and in return extended families offer emotional support and financial security in Arab families” (Hakim-Larson et al. 304). Additionally, the extended families in Arab American culture consist of tribes which are governed by leaders and traditions. The extended family in Arab American culture “remains a source of protection and support for its members regarding personal matters and attempts are made to handle family situations without outside involvement” (Mourad and Carolan 179). I emphasis this point at length because in many of the texts I examine in this study, the closeness of family bonds sometimes carries with it negative connotations. Many of the young protagonists in Arab American literature feel the strain of maintaining these close bonds in the face of peer pressure, a topic I will treat at length.

Hammad et al. claim that there are three types of family units in Arab/Arab American culture: the first one is the nuclear unit “which consists of the father, mother, and offspring... [it is] the least significant in the culture of the Arab world” (Hammad 17). The second type of family is “the ‘aila (the extended family) or the joint family. It consists of father, mother, unwed children, as well as wedded sons and their wives and children, unwed paternal aunts, and, sometimes, unwed paternal uncles. In short, this unit is composed of blood relatives plus women who were brought into the kinship through marriage” (17). The third type of family structure is “hammula, or clan. It consists of all individuals who claim descent from the same paternal ancestor. The Arab village community is normally composed of three or four such hammula units, which may be called the qabila, and each of these units of hammulas are composed of several joint families” (17). Hammad et al observe that:
the Arab family is the center of all loyalty, obligation, and status of its members...the individual identity in Arab society tends to be much less important than the identity defined by the extended family affiliation...the individual’s loyalty and duty to his or her family are greater than any other social obligation...Once a child is born to a young couple, the people stop referring to the parents by their first names and begin calling them after the name of their child. Women are related in the same fashion through the patrilineal line, and they maintain such identification even after marriage; though women do not add their husband’s name to their own after marriage. (17, 18)

Additionally, it should be emphasized that one of the cultural features shared among Arab Americans is the belief that Arab American society should be characterized as collectivistic, where “independent thinking and individual needs, feelings, and thoughts are discouraged in favor of a submissive approach to the will of the family and larger social group” (Hakim-Larson et al. 303). This cultural feature puts the emphasis on needs of the group, not on the needs of individual, which influences the individual’s behaviors and makes him/her restricted to the utility of the family – a concept that, as we shall see, creates stress for the children of immigrants who are attending school with children who may not share these beliefs.

The collectivist ideology in Arab American culture offers a rationale for the existence of the culture of honor or “sharaf,” in which “Arab American parents resort to shaming and criticism when rearing their children as a way to control behavior in front of others and to preserve family honor” (El-Khadiri 48). Religious institutions such as the mosque and the church play an important role in enforcing the collectivism of Arab
American culture, and many Arab Americans support these institutions because they offer Arab Americans a sense of community and a place in which to unify their efforts against prejudice and racism. Thus, Arab American collectivist culture places pressures on individuals’ behaviors and actions that are viewed as reflections on the entire group.

For the most part, Arab American families are patrilineal; children are encouraged to identify strongly with the lineage of the father (Ahmad 7; Salari 584). Christian Arab Americans prefer to name their children with Biblical names followed by the father’s first name and then by the family names; Muslims often name their children with the name Mohammad and with the “servant of God names” such as “Abdul-Rahman, ‘Servant of the Compassionate’” (Ahmad 7).

Arab American families are characterized as patriarchal or “paternalistic,” in which the males have authority over women, either by custom or by religious tenet. Thus, in most Arab American families, custom dictates that men are responsible for protecting a woman’s honor and reputation, for providing for her material needs, and for perpetuating this system in the next generation. In these families, men are considered as the “heads” of the family and gain a higher respect for their role as “the legitimate authority for all matters of family” (Hakim-Larson et al. 304). Additionally, Mourad and Carolan claim that in the Arab collectivist culture, each member has his/her own role to play in the family, in which “men are viewed as representatives of the family beliefs, values, and positions to the external world; …women are expected to play a more internal and submissive role within the home structure” (179).

Both Muslim and Christian Arab Americans have similar ethnic and cultural heritage practices regarding gender roles and family relations, in which most Arab
American women are responsible for childrearing, housekeeping, preserving Arab culture, values, and religion among their children, and educating their children (Read 210; Durrani 2000; Mourad and Carolan 180). Durrani refers to Khlalil Gibran’s saying about the role of Arab American mothers in Arab American culture as “The mother is everything in life. She is the consolation in our sadness, the hopes in our distress, the strength in our weakness. She is the source of our compassion, she is love and grace” (qtd. in Durrani 2000). Additionally, most girls in Arab American culture are supposed to be submissive and dependent on their families. They are protected and controlled by the males of their families (Nardi 21). I emphasize “supposed to be,” because as I discuss in subsequent chapters, it is this very set of practices that characterize the intergenerational conflict that is focused upon in many texts within the Arab American literary tradition.

Marriage is highly important in Arab American culture, and in many families, the idea that a girl should view marriage as an important goal is emphasized; “people often wish... [a] child ‘farhatek,’ your happiness on your wedding day” (Ahmad 7). Additionally, premarital sex is prohibited and shameful in Arab American culture, and it can lead to tragic and serious consequences, especially for young women; “natality” is respected in the context of family and “infertility” is considered as a shameful thing; “birth” is considered as “a feminine experience” and not witnessed by males in the birth room (Ahmad 7). Hammad et al. claim that in most Arab American families:

The sex impulse in both men and women is strictly suppressed before marriage. Sexual relations outside of marriage are considered a great social ill and a behavior that is divisive and undermines societal stability. As such, premarital and extra-marital sexual relations are considered highly shameful and blameworthy.
Girls are expected to be virgins (physically intact) at their marriage. If either a man or woman is found to be unchaste, harm and shame comes to that individual and his/her family. Emphasis on sexual abstinence among girls is greater than among boys, as the girl’s dignity normally represents the honor of her family. While rates of pre-marital sex are very high in the general U.S. population, rates of premarital sex are quite low for Arabic youth… questioning about sex may be psychologically disturbing to the individual if they are unmarried. (20, 21)

As reflected in the novels featured in this study, the desire to preserve the above-mentioned social mores in most Arab American families combine with a focus on children’s education and obedience to their parents. As Hammad notes, for the most part, this obedience is “a lifelong commitment that supersedes all other social commitments, including marital allegiance” (20). Hammad et al. comment on the way in which many children are brought up in Arab American culture:

Children are encouraged to live in the parents’ home until marriage, and little pressure exists for the child to seek his/her own social independence… Discipline of the child tends to be punishment-oriented rather than reward-oriented. In Arab norms, light physical discipline and strong verbal reprimands of the child or even screaming at the child is considered proper parenting and is viewed as correcting the child’s etiquette rather than being seen as violence…In early childhood, the child is predominately trained and disciplined by the mother, who sometimes spanks the child for misbehavior. The authority of the father begins to manifest itself more strongly as the child grows older…the child learns from an early age to obey and respect the parents and other elderly people in the family…
children are taught a system of etiquette called *adab*, which is a set of expected behaviors that, when fulfilled, earns the child the approval of being *adib* (well mannered). Under this system, children are taught to obey their parents and respect their elders. (20, 21)

Moreover, at the other end of the age spectrum, Arab American culture gives a priority for the care of elderly people. The elderly are given the highest degree of respect and are considered as “an avenue to Heaven” (Moradi and Hasan 419; Ahmad 7). Durrani comments on the value of respecting elderly people in Arab culture, in which “children learn from an early age to respect and care for their parents far into their elder years. For many Arabs/Arab Americans, the concept of placing ‘burdensome’ parents into nursing homes for strangers to care for violates family values” (2000). Given this emphasis on the importance of valuing the elderly, it is clear that when young adults go against social mores, they are also thought to be dishonoring their elders – a concept that can deepen intergenerational conflict.

Significantly, fatalism and religious faith are of the basic characteristics of Arab/Arab American culture, and difference can emerge along generational lines, as well. Most first and second generation Arab American Muslims and Christians believe that death and disease are “the will of God.” Ahmad claims that “so many Arabs are fatalistic where diseases are God punishment and only God can cure [them]…[they] usually avoid discussing death, dying and how long a person is likely to live” (7). Hakim-Larson et al. claim that religious faith in Arab culture is considered as an emotional support for individuals who are in stressful situations. This is due to the fact that religion is "integral part to Arab culture" (305). They also point out that there are some shared cultural and
religious values among Arab Americans regardless of the different religious beliefs and nationalities, such as the idea that “life events are often seen as being predetermined or the result of ‘fate.’ Good fortune is sometimes viewed as God's reward and a blessing for living a good and faithful life, while difficulties are seen as the result of either punishment or as an opportunity to test one's faith” (305). The writers also note that fatalism “is reflected in the commonly used qualifying phrase, “Insh’allah” or “God willing” (305), phrases that appear frequently in the texts I study, usually uttered by older characters, as an indication of how this particular attitude permeates their thought processes.

In sum, although Arabs/Arab Americans are diverse people, they have shared cultural characteristics that are reflected across the many texts that I cover in this dissertation. Before moving on to discuss the literature, however, I feel it important to provide a brief history of the various waves of Arab American immigration, especially as this information is central to an understanding of the sorts of intergenerational issues that influence characters’ identity development.

Most scholars agree on the division of Arab immigration to the United States into three waves; the first wave occurred from 1880 until WWII, the second wave began post-WWII to 1965, and the third one began in 1965 and continues to the present day (Read 210; Hammad et al. 2; Wald 1307, 1308; Benitto 22, 23; Ludescher 93, 94; Chelala 417; El-Sayed and Galea 2; Özdil 6, 7; Moradi and Hasan 418, 419; Nigem 631; Amer and Hovey 336, 337; Britto 853; Salari 582; Majaj 3; Amer and Hovey 336; Sarroub 3).

Scholars trace an Arab presence in America to 1492, when a Spanish Arab interpreter from Granada named Luis de Torres came with Christopher Columbus and a
Moroccan Arab guide named Estephan, “traveled from Florida to Mexico on Spanish explorations” (Kowalski 10). Even before the first wave started, there were many early Arab immigrants who came to the United States, such as Commander Ahmad bin Na’aman who was welcomed by New Yorkers for his bringing two horses as “a gift for U.S. president Martin Van Buren from the Omani government’s ruler Sayyid Said bin Sultan” (Kowalski 10) in 1840. Özdil claims that Morocco was the first country which recognized the independence of the United States in 1787, so the “South Carolina House of Representatives decided in 1790 that people from Morocco should be treated according to the laws for white people, not the laws for blacks from Africa” (3). Kowalski posits that some of the early Arab immigrants were North African Arabs who were brought to America as slaves (10).

The first Arab immigration wave includes many immigrants who came from the Ottoman regions: Allepo, Syria, Mount Lebanon and Transjordan (Özdil 3; Sarroub 3; Amer and Hovey 336; Nigem 631; Hammad et al. 2; Chelala 417; Weston 95, 96), which were parts of greater Syria. The number of these immigrants was not known exactly because the records of the villagers in Ottoman Greater Syria did not provide exact statistics, but there is an agreement among scholars that the number of immigrants increased between 1880 and 1890 “from a few dozen per year to several thousands per year” (Özdil 3,4). One of the restrictions on the number of Arab immigrants was The Johnson-Read Immigration Act, passed in 1924 and designed to limit the number of Arab immigrants to 100 people per year (Özdil 4; Ludescher 94; Amer and Hovey 336).

Most of these early Arab American immigrants were poor Christian farmers and merchants or “sojourners” who came to the United States to work, to make money and to
return home, or to escape from “being drafted into the Turkish military under the ruling Ottoman Empire” (Damuni 13), and to find new opportunities and freedoms in America (Özdil 4; El-Sayed and Galea 2; Nigem 631; Sarroub 3; Ludescher 93; Britto 853; Damuni 13; Majaj 3; Mouradi and Hasan; Read 210; Bennito 22). The repressive policies of the Ottoman government in the mid 19th century in Mt. Lebanon and the turning of Greater Syria’s economy from “a subsistence economy to a market economy” provided a strong impetus for Arab immigrants to come to the United States (Özdil 7). Özdil argues that the overpopulation of Mt. Lebanon, the positive reports from Syrians “who exhibited Arab goods at 1876 Philadelphia exposition, and the Syrians’ positive reactions to the American missionaries which came to Syria in 1820s to convert Muslims and to make salvation to other Christian sects were other reasons for this wave of Arab American immigration (6,7). Individuals back home were fascinated by the letters they received from their immigrant family and friends regarding their success in the United States.

Most of the first wave of Arab American immigrants worked as peddlers selling household goods (Khan 2; Ludescher 93; Amer and Hovey 336; Özdil 4; Boosahda xiii). This is due to the fact these immigrants were young, unmarried men who were not well-educated or were unskilled in their work (Özdil 4; E-Sayed and Galea 2; Nigem 631; Sarroub 3; Ludescher 93; Britto 853). Peddling required little knowledge and few skills, and it enabled the immigrants to learn English and to be more acculturated into American society. As a result, it became the preferred kind of job for early immigrants (Özdil 5; Damuni 13).

Most of these immigrants were Christians who belonged to different sects such as Maronite, Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholic or Melkite, and Protestant (Özdil 5). These
Christian immigrants were able to assimilate into American society because of their shared faith with Christian Americans of other backgrounds. There were also some Arab individuals of Jewish descent who came from Aleppo in Syria, from Yemen, Morocco, and Iraq (Chelala 417). Most of the immigrants in this wave settled in Manhattan, Brooklyn, Boston, Detroit, and industrialized cities in the Midwest (Ahmad 3; Damuni 13). The lack of Shia and Sunni Muslims in this particular immigrant group can be explained by their sense that it would be difficult to them to practice their Islamic religion in a Christian society (Özdil 7).

Significantly, Arab immigration in the first wave was never visible because the immigrants did not immigrate from “a nation-state” like the Italians and “did not have a body of thought of post-Enlightenment era national consciousness, which the European immigrants did have. Therefore [they] were until relatively recently never visible as a cohesive group on a nationwide level in the United States (sic)” (Özdil 1). Additionally, first wave immigrants assimilated into American society, while preserving their cultural ties with their countries of origin (Ahmad 3; Hammad et al. 2; Özdil 13). The reasons behind their assimilation were “social compulsion” and ‘necessity,’ as their numbers were small, and they found that the American people preferred ‘ethnically identifiable immigrants,’ compelling Arab Americans redefine themselves in collective and ethnic terms, regardless of differences in religion” (Özdil 13). Often, newly arrived immigrants were mistakenly called and grouped as “Turks” or by the phrase “Turkey in Asia” until 1920, and then, as scholars have noted, they were often classified as “honorary whites” or “not quite whites,” or “Syrians” (Damuni 13; Najjar1). In other words, early Arab immigrants faced the problem of racial classification, and there are many cases on record
of individuals who went to court to prove their racial classification as “white” in order to avoid the negative impact of race-based discrimination (Najjar 1). These first wave immigrants built their mosques and churches and laid the foundation for the three million Arab Americans who would subsequently arrive in the United States during the next wave of immigration (Damuni 13).

Arab immigrants in this wave did not develop an Arab American ethnic identity, although they published Arabic newspapers and attended religious gatherings; their greatest attachment tended to be to people from their villages and towns. When they found that it would be impossible to them to return to their homelands, they started to assimilate into American society in order to be good citizens and to avoid racism, and their Christian religion facilitated their integration into mainstream society. As a result, they lost their fluency in Arabic and affiliation with Eastern Christianity, and were unaware of the nationalist ambitions in their homelands like the formation of the state of Lebanon, because they were often cut off from news from their homelands (Wald 1307; Naff 16).

Unlike the first immigration wave, the second wave included Arab immigrants who came from many different Arab regions and countries such as Palestine, Jordan, Egypt, Iraq, Morocco, Yemen, as well as Lebanon and Syria (Khan 1; Nigem 631, 632; Wald 1307, 1308). Most of these immigrants were Muslims seeking better economic conditions and attempting to escape from political crises that formed as a consequence of the creation of an Israeli state and the subsequent Arab-Israeli war in 1948 (Wald 1307, 1308; Ahmad 3; Read 210; Benitto 23). Unlike first wave immigrants, the Arab immigrants in this wave were “educated, bilingual, politicized immigrants that belong[ed]
to middle-class backgrounds and formed a diverse group either religiously or geographically” (Benitto 22). Additionally, this wave included many students who studied in American universities and decided to stay because of the lack of employment opportunities and the manifestation of political crises in their homelands. In this wave, the immigrants were professionals who mostly married and settled in large urban areas (Khan 1; Ahmad 3; Nigem 631, 632). Furthermore, Lebanese and Palestinian immigrants in this wave who escaped political turmoil in their countries were “often secular in their worldviews. Although most adapted to the American way of life, they continued to identify with the Arab world and to speak Arabic in the home” (Sarroub 3).

The immigrants in this wave were able to form a part of their Arab identity in the United States when they arrived because some of their countries of origin had been European colonies and were now breaking away from the colonial system (Ahmad 3). As a result, these immigrants started to build their Arab consciousness and political ideology related to the political crises in their homelands. Additionally, many scholars claim that because of the immigrants’ status in this wave as “a ‘religious minority,’ they faced a number of obstacles in order to become acculturated into American society, and they were more tied to their countries of origin and to the traditional norms regarding women’s domestic roles, as they tried to connect Arab American communities to the issues of the Arab world (Read 210; Ahmad 3; El-Sayed and Galea 2; Nigem 631; Moradi and Hasan 418, 419; Ludescher 94; Amer and Hovey 336; Britto 853; Ahmad 3, 4; El-Sayed and Galea 2; Majaj 3; Amer and Hovey 337). Unlike the Arab immigrants in the first wave, the second wave Arab immigrants were strongly attached to a pan-Arab identity before immigrating to the United States; they were “far less reticent to assert
Arab identity in the United States. While there has been considerable variation among this cohort and its offspring, they have shown a greater proclivity than the first cohort of Arab Americans to maintain a strong ethnic identity, often rooted in Islam” (Wald 1307, 1308).

Arab immigrants in the second wave were more politically oriented and acculturated than members of the first wave, and they were prepared from the outset to settle as permanent residents. Because they faced overt and covert anti-Arab racism, they were much more conscious of their Arab American identity, and they introduced Arab assimilated immigrants to Arab nationalism and political orientation (McCarus 2, 3; Özdil 13; Boosahda 3). Many of the grandparents and parents featured in the novels covered in this study, either immigrated during this time period or were the children of such immigrants; thus, their values were shaped at this time and manifest themselves in their relationships with their children, the protagonists of the novels.

The third and current immigration wave of Arab immigrants to the United States includes diverse immigrants who are educated Muslims, politicized, skilled and professional workers, and bilingual individuals, coming from different areas like Egypt, Palestine, Jordan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Lebanon, and Morocco (Benitto 22; Khan 1; Nigem 631, 632). These immigrants have settled in “broader geographic pattern across the United States, including the West Coast” (Ahmad 3). Their assimilation into American society was less successful than that of the Arabs in the first wave, and they have created Muslim schools in order to keep their children connected with Arab culture and Arabic language (Ahmad 4).
The reasons behind their immigration are economic need and the desire to escape political conflicts in their countries of origin, such as the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the 1967 and 1973 Arab-Israeli wars, the Israeli invasion and occupation of southern Lebanon in 1982, the Iraq-Iran war, the civil wars in Yemen and Lebanon, the Iraqi government persecution of the Shi’ite minority in 1980s, the Gulf war in 1991, and political regime changes in Egypt, Syria, and Iraq, which motivated rich and middle-class people to immigrate to the United States (Benitto 22; Khan 1; Read 210; Ahmad 3; Hammad et al. 2; Mourad and Carolan 179). El-Sayed and Galea argue that this wave began after the end of the Immigration Act of 1965 which ended “the quota system favoring European immigrants” (2). Additionally, the immigrants in this wave represent displaced individuals who “are largely from agricultural backgrounds, representing some of the least technologically skilled and least educated segments of their respective nations of origin” (Hammad et al 2, 3). Wald presents a description of the political tendencies of the immigrants in this wave, in which

their primary political interest as Arab Americans focuses on civil rights and discrimination... [They] regard the Middle East conflict as a source of negative stereotypes that foster intolerance and encourage discrimination, preventing Arabs from being fully accepted as Americans and threatening their civic equality ...For the more recently arrived immigrants..., the political agenda is dominated by ‘back home’ issues related to the Arab-Israeli conflict... [they] were galvanized by Nasser’s pan-Arabism in the 1950s, jarred by Israel’s military victory in the Six-Day War in 1967, and outraged by the atrocities associated with the Lebanese conflict in the 1980s. (1308)
As a result of the political unrest in their countries of origin and racism against them in America, the immigrants in this wave and the descendants of the first and second immigration waves have begun organizations designed to defend their rights and to "defend the Arab point of view and to combat negative stereotypes of Arabs in the popular press (Ludescher 94). Some of the prominent organizations formed in this era include "the Association of Arab American University Graduates...in 1967, followed by the National Association of Arab Americans in 1972, the American Arab Anti Discrimination Committee in 1980 and the Arab American Institute in 1985" (Khan 2).

The major event in this wave that awakened Arab Americans to their altered identity in the public realm was the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, which led many Arab Americans to have their voices heard by all Americans. Setting aside their religious, national, and political differences, leading Arab Americans set out to establish Arab American organizations that defended against negative media stereotypes and called for including Arab American viewpoints in the development of American foreign and domestic policy (Majaj 3). Before that event, most Arabs in America were less concerned about their Arab origins; they identified with their national origins, but they did not think about the identity label "Arab Americans" because they were not politically oriented about their pan-Arab national identity (McCarus 4).

As Özdil claims, national organizations established by Arab Americans since the 1960s have included features of Arab American political and ethnic identity. This political and ethnic identity embraced by Arab Americans in 1960s and 1970s primarily focused on the political ideology of Arab Americans crossing the religious lines among
them, and focusing only on the value of “being an Arab,” so Arab American identity was “secular and unifying” (13; Majaj 3).

However, in the 1980s, Arab Americans’ unity was threatened by the spread of fundamental Islamic movements in the Arab World which impacted Arabs’ political ideologies and consequently the ideologies of many Arab Americans (Özdil 14). As Özdil observes, the Christian and non-Islamist Arab Americans “beheld this development with mistrust throughout the 1980s and 1990s. They had a profound fear that the assumption of an Islamic political identity by some Muslim Arab Americans would mean the death of cross-religious Arab American unity” (14).

In sum, Arab American immigration history is highly influenced by political unrest and crisis and difficult economic situations in the Middle East which motivated immigrants to come to America to build and a new peaceful life away from conflict. In the early waves of immigration, Arab Americans were obliged to assimilate and to integrate into American society in order to be accepted by it. But when their immigration numbers increased and their religious, ideological, educational, professional, political diversity became clear, Arab Americans felt that there was a need to foreground their identity, especially after the Arab-Israeli conflict, so they established their organizations to defend their rights in America.

In the contemporary era, Arab Americans have been negatively impacted by the September 11th Acts, which made them the target of media portrayals casting them as a threat to the nation. Since 2001, Arab Americans have faced a new and virulent wave of prejudice, violence, hostile acts, negative stereotypes, racism, racial and ethnic discrimination, harassment, citizenship difficulties, psychological distress and anxiety,
poorer health status, hate crimes, and US governmental policies like special registration and racial profiling (Padela and Heisler 284; Landauro 2, 3; Cainkar 67; Salaita 146; Howell and Shryock 443, 444; Horowitz 94; Abdelkarim 51; Audi 2; Moradi and Hasan 418; Shryock 917; Mourad and Carolan 178; Fang 26, 27; Clemetson and Naughton 69; Gold 48; Asali 33; Samhan 4; Ammar 52, 53; Rothschild 8,9; Salari 581).

As my study will indicate, the influence of the September 11th Acts and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have been significant upon Arab American young adults. Arab Americans have been negatively portrayed in the media as dangerous outsiders and have suffered from racial and cultural prejudice (Shaheen 10; Samhan 3; Wingfield and Karaman 1; Twair 52; Michael 701, 703; Weston 92, 94; Nacos and Torres-Reyna 1; Salari 581; Alaswad iv, v; Woll and Miller 179; Alsultany iv, v; McCarus 6). Arab Americans are also misrepresented and ignored in American educational curricula and underrepresented in the sectors of academic where they would be able to identify and to correct such inaccurate curricula (Wingfield and Karaman 2; David and Ayoubi 14, 15; Suleiman 39). Moreover, there is a special challenge facing Arab Americans and Arab immigrants involving “the perception of many Americans about their religion.... Following the rise of radical Islamic terrorists and 9/11, Arab Americans and Arab immigrants have often been the target of discrimination, as many Americans associate Islam with terrorism. Thus, children often tease Arab-Americans or Arab immigrant young adolescents because of their foreign sounding names, traditional clothing, or practice of fasting during Ramadan” (Al-Hazza and Bucher 6).

Cainkar’s *Homeland Insecurity* (2009) makes a useful contribution to Arab American studies through chronicling the effect of the September 11th Acts on Arab
Americans. She claims that the treatment of Arab Americans is based on previous racist discourses, in which Arab Americans have been constructed as having “a propensity to violence, a disposition to terrorism, and an entrenched hatred of America” (64). Cainkar compares Arab American media depictions to the depiction of the Japanese Americans as a dangerous and “treacherous” group before, during, and directly after World War II. This stereotype resulted in the US government and the public’s support for the incarceration of Japanese Americans in camps during the war (65). She suggests that following the September 11th Acts, Arabs and Muslim Americans were ‘de-Americanized’ by a combination of the actions of members of the public and of government-sanctioned entities. She argues that the de-Americanization process was gendered, with government agencies stereotyping men as potential terrorists and the public stereotyping women as “violators of American values” based upon their observance of certain religious tenets (233).

Baker et al. describe the notion of citizenship for Arab Americans after the September 11 Acts, focusing their research on Detroit. In their work, the writers study the conflict between citizenship the political crisis in the lives of Arab Detroit, in which “for Arab and Muslim Americans, citizenship has been shaped by crisis in historically specific ways, most of which predate the so-named war on terror” (4). The authors of the book argue that Arab Americans “are caught up in highly ambivalent relationships with their own nation-state...they must struggle to assert credible and secure attachment to domestic models of U.S. citizenship.... [T]hey must prove to a larger American society that their first loyalty is to the United States, and that whatever ties they maintain to Arabs and Muslims abroad are not a threat to Americans at large” (26). This study is
important because of its emphasis on the sense of belonging for Arab Americans who find themselves at a critical point in revealing their loyalty for the United States or for their countries of origin, a topic that emerges frequently in Arab American literature.

“We’re the new blacks” – this is how Moustafa Bayoumi characterizes the situation of Arab Americans in the US after the September 11th Acts. Bayoumi’s book has made an important contribution to the study of Arab American experience in general and of the Arab American young adults in particular, thus I feel it important to include a description of his study as background to my own analysis of the novels that I will treat in this dissertation.

Bayoumi compares the status of Arab Americans with that of African Americans, as both of them suffer from suspicion and hostility and are subject to racial profiling. The researcher depicts the life of seven young Arab Americans living in Brooklyn, New York by relating their stories to the portrait of the African American experience. Bayoumi’s selection of Brooklyn is based on the fact that it has the largest Arab American population in the United States, and it includes more diversity as his subjects have Palestinian, Iraqi, Yemeni, and Lebanese backgrounds. Thus, this environment is more suitable for the writer than Dearborn, Michigan, which has a less diverse Arabic population. Bayoumi traces the history of suffering of multi-ethnic groups, in which Native Americans were “labeled as ‘merciless Indian savages’ by the declaration of Independence,…Irish and Italian Americans were attacked for their religion…German Americans were loathed and reviled, sauerkraut was redubbed ‘liberty cabbage’…anti-Semitism drove Jewish Americans out of universities and jobs…Chinese Americans were commonly suspected of harboring Communist sympathies during the McCarthy
And Hispanic Americans have long been seen as outsider threats to American culture” (2-3).

Bayoumi argues that the September 11 Acts and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have brought Arabs and Muslims to the attention of mainstream America. These terrorist attacks and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have put the “dream (fairness) in jeopardy for American Arabs and Muslims. In the eyes of some Americans, they have become collectively known as dangerous outsiders. A USA Today/Gallup Poll from 2006 shows that 39 percent of Americans admit to holding prejudice against Muslims and believe that all Muslims—U.S. citizens included—should carry special IDs” (3)

Bayoumi claims that the governmental policies against Arabs and Muslims increased generalized suspicion against them, leading to profiling by law enforcement officials. The writer describes a profile as “a sketch in charcoal, the simplified contours of a face, a silhouette in a black and white, a textbook description of a personality. By definition a profile draws an incomplete picture. It substitutes recognition for detail. It is what an outsider from the street observes when looking through the windowpane of someone else’s life” (4).

Bayoumi notes that profiling Arabs and Muslims in America has two types: “the exceptional assimilated immigrant or the violent fundamentalist, with very little room in between” (4). He adds that their frames of reference in media are terrorism, women, and assimilation, and the “terms such as ‘moderate’ and ‘radical’ are bandied about so freely as to mean next to nothing, and clichéd phrases like ‘sleeper cells’, ‘alienated Muslims,’ ‘radicalization,’ and ‘homegrown terrorists’ degrade the language to the point that they structure the thinking about the Muslims living among us” (4-5).
Bayoumi points out that Arabs and Muslims in the USA are negatively portrayed in the media:

[T]hey appear as shadowy characters on terror television shows, have become objects of sociological inquiry, and get paraded around as puppets for public diplomacy. Pop culture is awash with their images. Hookah cafes entice East Village socialites, fashionistas appropriate the checkered kaffiyah scarf, and Prince sings an ode to a young Arab-American girl. They are floating everywhere in the virtual landscape of the national imagination, as either villains of Islam or victims of Arab culture. (5)

Bayoumi argues that his selection of young Arab Americans as subjects of study enables him to show “how the pressures of their domestic life and foreign policy push on individual lives” (11). In his interviews, these young Arab Americans share their desires: opportunity, marriage, happiness, and the chance to fulfill their potential. But what they have now are “extra loads to carry, burdens that often include workplace discrimination, warfare in their countries of origin, government surveillance, the disappearance of friends or family, threats of vigilante violence, a host of cultural misunderstandings, and all kinds of other problems that thrive in the age of terror” (12). However, Bayoumi seems optimistic about young Arab Americans’ status because they understand both the adversities they face and the opportunities they have with an enviable maturity. They have a keen awareness about their lives, an acute kind of double consciousness that comprehends the widening gap between how they see themselves and how they are seen by the culture at large. They live with their
multiple identities and are able to draw connections to the struggles others have faced in our American past. (12)

This optimism attributed to young Arab Americans is clear in Bayoumi’s account of Rasha, who despite the fact that her family was imprisoned for three months during the crackdown on Arabs after the terrorist attacks, still hopes for a positive future for herself. Additionally, Bayoumi depicts the strength of these individuals, which is related to the strength of Islam as a faith that brings life, love, and dignity for its followers. For example, Yasmin, who tolerates the discriminatory policies of her high school, finds ways to cope that involve self-affirmation. In short, Bayoumi tries to depict young Arab Americans in a different way from their representation in American public culture. How Does It Feel to be a Problem? is filled with stories of young men and women who grapple with their identities, who suffer uncertainty, indignity, and even violence due to post 9/11 racism” (Darraj 1).

Despite these positive case studies put forward by Bayoumi, even he must acknowledge that many Arab American teenagers have lost trust and confidence in each other; one young man, Sade, called into question the concept of friendship after discovering that some of his friends spied on him. Bayoumi claims that “informants and spies are regular conversation topics in the age of terror, a time when friendships are tested, rust disappears and tragedy becomes comedy” (22). Bayoumi shows us through writing about Sade’s case how some Arab Americans have lost their jobs because of “the anti-Arab and anti-Muslim invectives slung at [them]” (22).

Diliberto, who is a researcher in Arab American studies, claims that Arab culture, though rich and diverse, is misunderstood and misrepresented in the United States
because of Hollywood’s influence. The researcher thinks that the lack of good quality literature about Arab experiences plays a role in the public’s misunderstanding of people of Arabic descent. He argues that American teens should understand the discrimination and prejudice beyond what they see in the movies (33). One way for that to happen, of course, is for a greater use of Arab American young adult literature in the high school classroom.

Wray-Lake et al. examine how Arab American adolescents’ sensitivity to negative depictions of them as “enemies of America” (84) influences their socialization. The writers note that these adolescents who reported that their ethnic group is negatively portrayed in the American media as enemies of the United States “are more attuned to personal experiences of prejudice based on their ethnic identity and are more dubious that the tenets of the social contract apply equally across groups” (84). Additionally, the writers find that the negative images of Arab Americans existed before the September 11, 2001 (84). In short, this study depicts young Arab-Americans’ problems dealing with negative media stereotypes of young men, especially, as terrorists and enemies of the United States, while they are also learning how to be American citizens (91).

Britto tackles the ethnic identity formation of Arab Muslim children in American society; he defines ethnic identity formation as “a process of developing an understanding of one’s origins with respect to a particular reference group, [which] begins in childhood and often consolidates in adolescence” (853). The researcher claims that the social, political, and cultural environment in which they have lived have influenced Arab American young adults’ ethnic identity, especially as the September 11 Acts [have] promoted “wariness toward Arab Muslims in the Western world” and have put Arab
American young adults’ psychological well-being at risk (853). The writer adds that after September 11, “there have been increasing reports of schools becoming a milieu of discrimination, bullying, and exclusion of Arab Muslim students” (854). Britto makes an important point when she notes that Arab American young adults are harmed by pedagogical practices that emphasize negative depictions of their religion at school (855). This difference between what is taught at school and what is taught at home might make adults confused, let alone children (855). Thus, the significance of this study stems from its emphasis on those institutions that play an important role in Arab American young adults’ understanding of their ethnic identity.

There are many scholars who consider the cultural identity formation of Arab American young adults and the role of family in this regard. The shared claim among these scholars is that Arab American young adults are stressed and are psychologically influenced by the stressors resulting from their parents’ expectations and restrictions on them to live according to Arab ethnic traditions and values (Hattar v). Additionally, these Arab American young adults face more pressures and challenges when they try to incorporate some American traditional values in their Arab identities than other ethnic minority youth. This is due to the differences between American and Muslim values and traditions (Britto and Amer 146).

For instance, Ayouby and Mokbel examine how Arab American youth in Dearborn, Michigan struggle to live with both their Arab and American identities. The parents of these Arab American young adults view them as non-Arabs because they are not attached to the Arab values and traditions; yet the larger community does not perceive them as Americans. These Arab American young adults try to build a new hybrid culture
and identity, in which they attempt to be Arabs and Americans. However, the researchers claim that many of these young adults “are thriving because ultimately they do not see themselves deficient, rather they count themselves as whole individuals, intuitively accepting their hybrid natures” (1). The importance of this study lies in its focus on the conflict most Arab American young adults suffer from because of their sense of belonging neither to Arab culture nor to the American culture. This theme is a major one discussed in Arab American literature focused on adolescence.

Kazaleh studies how Palestinian adolescents living in Jacksonville, Florida deal with their bicultural identity and ethnic identity. The researcher finds that the biculturalism and ethnic identity was “problematic” for these adolescents because of the need to compromise between the values of their Arab ethnic identity and the values of American culture (ii). Additionally, the writer notes that there is a cultural conflict in the lives of these adolescents who try to adapt to their home context and to public contexts such as the school and the workplace. The writer finds that many of them had acquired an array of mechanisms for dealing with the dissonance and were adept at alternating between both cultural orientations with minimal anxiety. The degree of parents’ and clans’ acculturation of contemporary mainstream values was judged to be a determinant of adolescent adjustment. Evidence of identity conflict was suggested in individual instances where the parents and clan reacted with greater anxiety to the rapid acculturative change and resisted mainstream influences. Those youth who were afforded more outlets for social expression, either within the ethnic community or outside of it, presented the image of being more confident in their abilities and tolerant of the ethnic
lifestyle than those who were overprotected by their families and restricted in their activities with peer groups. (iii)

Additionally, the writer notes that because of the ethnic identity values of these adolescents, their behaviors at school have been influenced by these family values (iii). The significance of this study is that it treats the conflict between the values of home and school in the lives of Arab American young adults.

Also of interest are the lives of young Arab Americans whose families are from war torn regions. Ali depicts the situation of Arab American teens in Chicago who have been impacted by the failure of the Middle East peace process and the increasing violence between Israelis and Palestinians. Ali points out that the Palestinians who mourn the death of compatriots in the Middle East, “worry about the safety of relatives on the West Bank and remain frustrated by what they see as slanted American coverage of the conflict” (1). Ali claims that the suffering of Palestinian American youth stems from the fact that they “are caught between warring cultures and dueling political ideologies” (1). In interviews with a number of teens, Ali has found that these young people express concern regarding their ties with their countries of origin. As one of them said during a flare up of tension in the Middle East, “frustrations were running high, and the young people needed to talk” (1), while another one expressed his blame of American policy towards the conflict by saying, “we have representatives of our own government stating that ‘Palestinians are lower than pond scum’” (1). Ali concludes that the reaction of this subset of Arab American teenagers is reflected in their desire to join protests against Israeli strikes and in planning their own newspaper. One of these teenagers, Azza Jammal, depicts her goal and the goal of all of her friends as the need “to learn about
where I came from, then educate people as to who I am...I think we could change things” (1). Ali’s findings shed light on a general pattern found in Arab American YA literature in which young people’s ties with their countries of origin impact their sense of belonging as Americans.

Furthermore, there are many scholars who study the impact of discrimination and racism following the September 11 Acts and Arab American parents’ lack of openness to American culture on Arab American young adult’s psychological states. In “Mental Health Issues of Arab American Youth,” Sulaiman discusses the main challenges that have faced Arab American youth, including “immigration & acculturation, trauma, and discrimination after 9/11” (2); she argues that young immigrants have “psychological stress and loss” (3), and she notes the gap between first and second generations, which results from the first generation’s sadness resulting from their sense of loss as they adjusted to America, and the second generation’s feeling of “emotional turmoil and family conflict due to [a] difference in parent-child acculturation levels” (3). Regarding Arab American youth, Sulaiman notes that this population is prone to trauma that results from their exposure to war and to displacement in their homeland countries, leading some of them to use drugs and alcohol. Moreover, “parental trauma makes parents emotionally unavailable to their children [which] negatively impacts the youth” (4). In discussing the role of 9/11 on Arab American youth, the researcher relies on two studies: the first one conducted by Zogby (2001) who shows that “60% worried about the long term effects of discrimination after 9/11, 20% personally experienced discrimination because of their ethnicity, 45% knew someone who experienced discrimination since 9/11” (qtd. in Sulaiman 5). The second study was conducted by Moradi & Hasan (2004), who found a
direct link between discrimination and self-esteem and psychological distress, in which “53% [of respondents] reported being treated unfairly by strangers because they were of Arab descent, 47% reported that they had been in an argument about something racist done to them, 46% reported that they had been called racist names at least once in a while within the last year” (6).

Ahmed examines how Arab American adolescents were affected by the incidents of racism after September 11. The writer notes that these racism experiences influence the psychological state of Arab American adolescents. Al-Hazza and Bucher describe the problems faced by Arab American young adults in this way:

Young adolescent Arab Americans or Arab immigrants may also face a conflict between personal identity and cultural identity. When young adolescents from cultures that place a high value on family loyalty come to the U.S. and try to adapt to the majority culture, they often have difficulties adjusting to the emphasis that Americans place on individual competence and competition. For example, Arab values stress the importance of family and religion, respect for elders, and the importance of family before self. Arab society is both collective and authoritarian with children expected to adhere to their parents’ and teachers’ expectations and regulations. Thus, in Arab cultures, the young adolescent identifies with the family and bases his or her self-esteem on family status and reputation and on support and approval from the family. Using an authoritarian style, many Arab parents emphasize obedience, restrict autonomy, and maintain control. Even at school, when an Arab student encounters verbal, physical, or emotional abuse or aggression from an educator, he or she may assume that this is the normal role of
a teacher and will not complain. As a result, many young Arab adolescents may have emotional and behavioral problems including depression and low self-esteem. (6, 7)

Henry et al. examine how Arab American college students’ psychological states are influenced by their parents’ openness to American culture. Some of the students in their study claim to be confused because their parents ask them to identify with Arab culture, whereas their teachers ask them to identify with the American one. Henry et al. believe that these students “will develop a negative self-image, which could inhibit their chances for growth and accomplishment…the children may separate themselves from their parents’ culture” (29). When Arab American parents find their children Americanized, they might be angry at them, and this could lead to conflict between them and generate psychological problems for the children (29). Some Arab American parents send their children to Islamic schools in order to keep their children from adopting American culture and maintain attachment to their native culture (Alghorani 53).

However, Ajrouch notes that Arab American adolescents wish to escape community gossip which is a result of living closer to each other. They want to find their “anonymity” and not to keep “all eyes on you” which is related to the American individualism. In other words, these young adults want to formulate their individualities away from the community observation. The writer adds that these young adults are in the tension “between community control and individual quests is negotiated within their community” (467).

Many scholars examine Arab American young adults’ struggle with the conflicting values between home and school and how American educational system
ignores the problems of Arab American young adults. For example, Sarroub relies on her experience as an educational anthropologist to conduct research on Arab American youth in America. The writer claims that the September 11, 2001 attacks in America brought a lot of attention to Arab Americans who were invisible (3). The writer focuses on the recent Yemeni and Iraqi young adult immigrants who live in southeastern Michigan and who are at different stages in the acculturation process.

Sarroub shows how these Yemeni American and Arab America young adults “struggle to find a middle ground between being American and Yemeni in their school and community” (3). They struggle with both “formal and informal curricula in their public schools. Formal curricula include the day-to-day academic subjects taught in school, while the informal curricula include physical education classes, extra-curricular sports, or lunch in the cafeteria. These academic and social dimensions become all the more complex when students do not participate as expected” (3). Most of the females students do not participate in after school sports because of cultural and religious reasons, as these activities are incompatible with the students’ social norms (3, 6). The writer gives an example, in which she notes that the “Yemeni girls who would like to participate in after-school, extra-curricular activities and are likely to suffer dire consequences from their families in the US and Yemen if they do, find it difficult to be American in that context” (6).

The writer claims that Arab American parents send their children to the Arabic school located in the mosque at the weekend in order to learn Arabic, read the Quran, and to know about Islam (6). Interestingly, “the students often questioned the values the teachers taught and compared them to what they learned at their public school....
Because there was very little interaction between the public school and the community, teachers in each setting knew very little about one another’s cultures (other than what they saw and heard in the public media) and communities” (6). The writer concludes by highlighting the role of educators in being aware of “how youth make sense of their world” (6). Some teachers are ignorant of their students’ culture, religion, and “their struggles to be both American and something else, such as Yemeni” (6). She suggests that the educators “must be aware not only of its existence but also of its manifestation and acknowledge that diversity is part of a larger geopolitical way of life. Awareness is the first step towards understanding” (6). The significance of this study is that it reflects a major theme in the depiction of Arab American adolescence involving the conflict between the values of home and school, when the protagonists struggle to maintain their Arab values in their school life.

In a related study, Zehr examines the difficulties Arab American young adults face in their learning of their home language (Arabic). She blames the educational system for not founding the Arabic language program for the students. One of the students says “I never knew how to read and write, not even my name, until I started in the 5th grade, and it’s all because of that one teacher” (20). The writer shows how most Arab American students try to speak their heritage language in order to honor their Arab identity. Most of the teens say that they learned their language in their home countries, but when they came to the United States, they forgot Arabic and started to practice the non-standard forms at home and with Arab friends. Reihab Omar, a 16-year-old-teen says “I want to know the language from where I’m from so if I ever go back, I’ll know how to speak” (24). The importance of this study is related to its focus on the role of home language in making
Arab American young adults be attached to their ethnic culture. In other words, Arabic learning is considered as a marker of belonging to Arabic culture and values.

Schwartz studies the negative stereotypes, discrimination, racism, and misconceptions about Arab and Muslim young adults at American schools. The writer claims that some Arab American parents send their children to study in Islamic schools in order to make them receive education that is consistent with the religious beliefs and to help them avoid discrimination they might find in public schools. The challenge lies in the other parents who send their children to public school, in which the Arab culture and history is not acknowledged. The significance of this study lies in its reflection of the problems most Arab American young adults face in their learning at American schools because of the negative stereotypes against Arabs. This theme is a dominant one in all Arab American texts that focus on young people.

Ayish highlights the fact that Arab American Muslims receive less attention in American education than other ethnic and religious groups. Arabs are the target of negative stereotypes and discrimination. The writer investigates how Arab American Muslim high school students deal with the negative stereotypes of Arabs in and out of American schools. The writer notes that these Arab American Muslim high school students feel disconnected from their society and school as a reaction to the negative stereotypes against Arabs. The role of schools in ignoring and marginalizing Arab culture and culture intensifies the problem for these students (viii). However, discrimination and prejudice may motivate the ethnic awareness for Arab American young adults through making them discuss these experiences of prejudice and racism with their parents (Flanagan et al. 501).
Al-Hazza and Bucher emphasize that most American schools do not help Arab American students to reaffirm their cultural identity. The writers find a strong relationship between the Arab American students’ sense of their cultural identity within their cultural group and their self-esteem and academic success. However, the writers think that the students should feel their cultural identity outside their cultural and ethnic group. They highlight the negative effect of prejudice and discrimination on Arab American students’ sense of self-esteem. In short, what the writers want to state in this study is that it is important to make Arab American students feel their cultural identity outside their cultural group in order to make them successful students in academic life (5-11).

As far as gender studies are concerned, scholars such as Bing-Canar and Zerkel have examined the stereotypes of young Arab-American women in American media. They have noticed young Arab-American women are always shown in “the harem and they’re belly-dancing. Or they’re in the chador and the hijab and they’re so persecuted…or usually, they’re just the seductress” (735). They claim that young Arab American women are victims of a combination of sexism and racism, as well as the marginalization of their Arab communities. In short, this study shows us how media plays an important role in the way young Arab-American women are perceived and perceive themselves.

Hakim-Larson et al. argue that Arab American female adolescents face many problems in their attempt to assimilate, such as “intergenerational conflicts [that] may arise in families around issues such as dating, education, and appropriate dress” (306). For instance, they note that where “a double standard exists for matters involving
sexuality,” these issues become “especially problematic for daughters as compared to sons” (306).

Mourad and Carolan discuss the ways that Arab American young females “may be torn about peer relationships and peer reactions and the ability to assimilate more readily…. [An] Arab female adolescent or young adult [has traditionally had two choices] whether to follow her religious beliefs and possibly face discrimination for this choice. These may be expressed in concerns that mimic social phobia or other anxiety disorders” (178). The writers highlight the influence of protecting Arab American unmarried women’s virginity on their psyches, in which “… young adult Arab women may experience this clash of cultures as they negotiate American life. To protect against ‘inappropriate’ behaviors, the mere discussion of sexual relations with members of the opposite sex may not be tolerated. This leaves these women in the vulnerable position of having few resources to consult” (180). Another issue results from the restrictions on the Arab American young adults’ premarital sexual relations is the fact that these young adults cannot discuss their sexual issues with a person outside of their family because they are scared that this will be shameful for their families. This fear of discussing these sexual issues might be difficult for the therapists because it is a culturally sensitive issue (180).

There are many scholars who focused on Arab American young adults’ reactions, especially those of girls, to the events of September 11, the Gulf War, and to the negative media depiction of Arabs. The importance of these reactions lies in their reflection in Arab American literature. For example, Landauro claims that many Arab American adolescents were unfairly treated, misunderstood, and discriminated against because of
the September 11 Acts. He refers to some Arab American adolescents’ comments such as those made by Aiat Baidas’s, a student at the Islamic Leadership School, who expresses her disappointment and sadness because of some Americans’ anger toward Arab Americans’ wearing of hijab: “Sometimes people look at me with an evil stare. It makes me sad” (qtd. in Landauro 13). The researcher cites another Muslim young adult who differentiates between good Muslims and extremists: “Good Muslims would not do such a thing [as commit terrorist attacks]….Most Muslims are good, caring people” (qtd. in Landauro 13). These self-affirmations are necessary because, as Wingfield and Karaman note, the effects of Arab stereotypes on Arab American children are profound. The researchers claim that because Arab American children have grown up in a culture that does not view their ethnic identity positively, they will have a conflict between what they learn at home and school regarding the traditions of the Arab world (2). They argue that these children might see their peers influenced by negative images about Arab heritage; these conditions will lead to “hurtful experiences.” The writers here refer to claims by famous Arab Americans who talk about their children’s experiences in dealing with these images. Wingfield and Karaman quote noted Arab American intellectual Jack Shaheen, who talks about how he was taught in his Lebanese American home good images about Arab heritage and culture, but at school “he remembers teasing, taunts and epithets: ‘camel jockeys,’ desert niggers,’ ‘greasy Lebs.’” (2). Shaheen describes how his children were angry when “eight students in the annual Halloween parade at their school dressed up as ‘Arabs’—with accessories such as big nose, oil cans or money bags to complete the customer” (2). The researchers refer to Carol Haddad, a second-generation American Lebanese who describes her experience at age ten: “Each time I left the security of my
family house, I experienced the oppression of being darker and different” (qtd. in Wingfield and Karaman 2). She remembers how she was called by boys in her neighborhood as a “nigger”.

Additionally, Wingfield and Karaman draw attention to the negative influence of the Gulf War on Arab American young adults, in which they saw their communities’ patriotic fervor towards this war and found that Arab society and Iraqi humanity were not well understood, so they “felt intimidated and silenced” (2). They also refer to cases of hostility at American schools, in which some basketball teams in Michigan schools refused to play with the team from Fordson High School because most of the basketball players were Arab Americans (2). Wingfield and Karaman conclude that the stereotypes of Arabs shown in films and on television can make Arab American children and teenagers feel “inferior and ashamed, or perhaps belligerent and aggressive” (3).

Abraham interviews some Arab American young adults in Michigan in order to know their opinions regarding the wars on Iraq and war on terrorism. The first adolescent interviewed is Ali who is a Lebanese student criticizing the war on Iraq by saying “we once believed America was the land of freedom and advancement, but we now know it as a land of arrogance and hatred toward Arabs and Muslims...we have to keep our mouths shut here” (qtd. in Abraham 587). Another Arab American young adult called Latifeh who wears a headscarf expresses the hostility she felt from average Americans when she went outside the Dearborn Arab community, she says:

When I went outside this community it was difficult to accept how prejudiced people can be. They stared down at us as if we were from a different planet. I try not to let these things get to me because I am proud of who I am, but sometimes
it's hard to deal with the stereotyping of Muslims. Right when I started to feel things were getting better, the horrible tragedy of September 11th occurred . . .

This affected my whole family, because my parents no longer wanted to go to work [preferring] to stay home and protect us ... many parents didn't send their children to school” (qtd. in Abraham 591).

The writer claims based in his analysis those Arab American youths “focused on Iraqi civilian deaths. In the post-war period, they questioned American claims to have ‘liberated’ Iraq” (592). The writer refers to Salam, a Yemeni American young who says “I could not believe what they were doing. I was angered when the news media showed some Iraqis cheering for America. [The Iraqis] do not realize the true reasons why America is there. One Iraqi I work with was disappointed by the outpouring. He said they were so oppressed by the former dictatorship that they would have cheered 'even for the Israelis’” (qtd. in Abraham 593).

Hardy interviews some Arab American teens who comment on the American war on Iraq and on how they react to the American negative depiction of Arabs. The first teen interviewed is Riham Braghouti, an 18-year-old Palestinian who lives in New York, who says “If you are of Arab descent, and you don’t sympathize with the actions taken by [Saddam] Hussien, you will be called a traitor by your own people. If you tell Americans who are not Arab that you support Hussien, they accuse you of supporting a dictator” (qtd. in Hardy 22). The writer asserts that Riham and other teens in his study came to America in 1980s, in which they escaped from “civil war in Lebanon, unrest in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, poverty in Egypt, and human-rights abuses in Iraq” (22).
As noted previously, the media has a major influence on young Arab Americans. For instance, Hardy notes how an American song entitled “Killing an Arab” had a huge reaction from the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee who “pressured Elektra Records into placing a disclaimer on the song” (22). In response to these negative depictions, Arab American teens have expressed their fears being misunderstood. Muhammad Bazzi, a 16-year-old Iraqi immigrant tells Hardy that “I can sense the tension sometimes, in the way people look at me in the streets.... As the American presence in the Middle East grows, the hostility will increase. Because of ignorance, people may become violent against us...A lot of my elders have spoken about how, if Americans become paranoid, they may decide to place (Arabs) in internment camps like the Japanese in World War II. It is a really scary situation” (qtd. in Hardy 22). Riham does not hide her anti-American feelings because of the American foreign policy in Middle East, telling Hardy that “I won’t feel comfortable fighting a war in the desert against people from my native home or of a similar ethnic background...I still have family over there, and we are concerned about their safety” (qtd. in Hardy 22).

Finally, based on the reactions summarized above regarding the negative influence of the September 11 Acts, the Gulf War, and subsequent media depiction of Arab Americans, it can be easy to see how these reactions have come to be reflected and mirrored in the literary output of contemporary Arab American writers. As I note in the next chapter, these authors mainly rely on reactions such as these when they depict young protagonists’ struggles with identity formation and with generational gaps that exist between themselves and their parents.
CHAPTER THREE

ARAB AMERICAN WOMEN WRITERS

This chapter sheds light on the reasons that many contemporary Arab American women writers have chosen to depict female adolescence with a focus on young women’s negotiation of generational conflict and identity formation. Given that most of the key texts in contemporary Arab American literature are written by women, it is important to establish in this chapter the place of these writers in the larger tradition of Arab American writing. Over the last two decades, texts such as Diana Abu-Jaber’s *Arabian Jazz*, Naomi Shihab Nye’s *Habibi*, Evelyn Shakir’s *Remember Me to Lebanon*, Leila Halaby’s *West of the Jordan*, Patricia Sarrafian Ward’s *The Bullet Collection*, and Alicia Erian’s *Towelhead* have comprised an important part of Arab American literature.

Arab American literature concerns the problems created by bicultural identity, by a loss of homeland and traditions, and by being the target of prejudice. Most critics in the field of Arab American literature study these problems as they relate to issues of assimilation, as first generation immigrants are often portrayed as being “too involved with dissolving into America, disappearing, sinking like old coffee into the new soil. Arab Americans [have been] silent about their past, partly because of their sense of family privacy, and partly because after the oil embargo of 1973, Arab Americans became, in the words of Nicholas Von Hoffman, ‘the last ethnic group safe to hate in America’” (Gabriel 1).

As noted in the previous chapter, Arab Americans have been subject to decades of racism, discrimination, negative stereotyping, and hostility in the United States. These problems have motivated Arab American cultural leaders and creative writers to put
forward in their texts the challenges that they face in the United States. These problems have also encouraged Arab American writers to try to find their place and identity in the American community. As Aossey, a researcher in Arab American studies puts it, “if we, as Arab Americans, don’t define who we are and for what we stand, someone else will do it for us. And nowhere is it more important for us to take a stand than in the true heritage of our people – the art and culture” (1).

Two prominent viewpoints regarding Arab American identity have emerged in the critical discourse on Arab American literature: the first viewpoint is that Arab American identity is a transplanted Arab identity tied to Arab traditions and culture. The second viewpoint is that Arab American identity is an American one and should be understood and defined according to the American context in which identity is formed through a mixture of both cultural influences. In my research, I have found that most Arab American women writers depict biculturalism in their writing. In the sections that follow, I provide background information that will explain the literary legacy from which these contemporary writers have drawn.

Majaj, in her article entitled “Arab-American Literature: Origins and Developments,” relates Arab-American literature to Arab American history. Beginning her essay with a consideration of the first wave of Arab American immigrants, Majaj terms these mostly Christian immigrants from the Syrian province of the Ottoman Empire and from Lebanon as “sojourners” who settled in colonies in New York and Boston, yet who intended to return home after developing wealth (1). Majaj argues that these early Arab American writers “voiced a mainly diasporan consciousness: a fact evident in their newspapers, which were often sectarian, political and geared toward events in the Middle
Majaj discusses the problem that most early Arab American writers faced: the pressure of assimilation into American society and the need to maintain Arab identity, noting that their newspapers and journals reflected “debates about how to preserve Arab identity in the American-born generation...integration” (1). In addition to addressing these issues, early Arab-American writers reacted against the lingering impact of the Naturalization Act of 1790, which granted American citizenship only to a “free white person” (1). Majaj points out to a number of “court cases known as the ‘prerequisite cases’ petitions for naturalization [which] were... denied on the basis of whether or not individuals qualified as ‘white’” (1). The writer claims that these cases were a challenge of inclusion or exclusion of Arab American ethnicity, and they reflected that Arabs could not be accepted as American citizens “on the basis of dark skin color, origin on the continent of Asia, distance (literal or metaphorical) from European culture, and cultural and geographical proximity to Islam” (1).

Majaj claims that the two opposing identities attached to “whiteness” and “non-whiteness” led Arab-American writers to establish a forum for debate of their place in the American literary canon, an organization called “Al Rabita al Qalamaiyya (the Pen League)” in 1920 (1). This league, which included the writers Khalil Gibran and Ameen Rihani, supported literature written in Arabic and English and helped to encourage the development of a literature known as ‘the mahjar (émigré) school of Arab American writing’” (1). Majaj states that these writers “were conscious of serving as bridges between East and West, and actively sought to establish philosophical meeting points between Arab and American ideologies and contexts, even as they invoked poetic
forbears of both east and west—from Al-Mutanabbi, Al-Farid, and al-Maari to Homer, Virgil, Milton, Emerson and Thoreau” (1).

Hassan sheds light on how early Arab American writers like Ameen Rihani who write in English try to “appropriate that stance of Orientalist translator” (250) because of their belief that they are better qualified to reflect the reality of the Middle East than are those Europeans who attempt to serve in a similar capacity (250). Since they were educated in Arabic and in English, they believed that it was their responsibility to correct the negativity associated with the Middle East in order to broaden cross-cultural understanding between their Arab countries and the West (250). Hassan argues that these writers were angry at the oppressive rule of the Ottoman Empire and admired the cultural and technological advances of the western world; they were proud of the Arab cultural and literary heritage, so “they could not accept the idea of the East’s inferiority...[and] saw themselves as reformers of East and West...[in which] East and West complement, need, and have something to teach each other” (251).

Karam discusses how the poetry and fiction of Khalil Gibran and his Arab-American colleagues contributed to the understanding of American modernism. The writer explains that:

These immigrants left the Middle East around the turn of the century. In America, they began questioning the conservatism of the world they left behind. To free Arabic poetry and literature from the bonds of tradition, they formed Arrabitah, the "Pen Bond," which began meeting in Gibran's New York studio in 1920. By exploring different social, political, and religious themes in their writings, they sifted through a wide spectrum of Middle Eastern and American beliefs to
determine which ones were worth keeping. These writers engaged in a "discourse of conscience" to reformulate their values and institutions. (ii, iii)

Arab-American literature in this period “reflected a strong need to prove [it]self worthy in the U.S. context” (Majaj 2), as authors attempted to demonstrate that Arab American literature had a place in the American literary canon. The genre of immigrant autobiography was particularly favored by these authors, as they were able to write about their immigration and their transition from their countries of origin to the United States. Examples of these texts include Abraham Rihbany and Salom Rizk’s autobiographies, developed with a mainstream white audience in mind. Both Ribany and Rizk avoided showing any Arab cultural values that might be deemed unacceptable by Americans and focused on shared common ground such as their Christian faith and their origin in the “Holy Land” (Majaj 2). Majaj notes that Rihbany and Rizk chose to employ “biblical rhetoric and religious parallels in their attempt to engage American readers and familiarize the ‘exotic’ even as they implicitly or explicitly sought to distance themselves from Islam” (2). Clearly, the impulse to assimilate was central to these authors.

Majaj argues that after the Mahjar literature era, which coincided with the beginning of WWII, Arab American literature “entered a period of quiescence” (2), due to the impact of the 1920 Johnson-Reed Quota Act which decreased the number of Arab American immigrants. The writer claims that Arab Americans at that time were obliged to assimilate in American society because of the disconnection of contact with their native culture. The apparent feature of Arab-American literature during this period was a tendency for authors to write “about their Arab background with hesitation and through self-distancing narrative strategies” (2). The writer cites the novelist Vance Bourjaily’s
works as an example from this period, in which the novelist “expressed his Lebanese identity only marginally” (2).

Ludescher argues that Arab Americans after World War II found that there was no hope that they would return to their countries, so they questioned their identity as Arab Americans and their relationship to the United States. This realization “greatly speeded up the process of assimilation and led to decreased sectarian conflict, increased calls for unity, and more participation in the American political process” (98). Thus, most Arab American literature in this stage reflected this process of assimilation. Ludescher goes on to discuss that the second generation of Arab American writers were uninterested in Arabic language and in their Arab heritage. According to Ludescher, by World War II, Arab Americans were highly assimilated in the American mainstream because of shared Christian beliefs and the “fact that they did not exhibit easily discernable racial or ethnic features that distinguished them from the general population” (100).

After the 1960s, Arab-American literature started to flourish again because of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements that paved the way for the production of immigrant and ethnic literature. Second wave Arab American immigrants found publishers and audiences who were interested in reading their works. What improved the situation for Arab American writers was the increasing number of Muslim immigrants from the Arab World who were more educated and politically oriented than the early immigrants. Majaj claims that these immigrants participated in stimulating early Arab Americans to “engage more directly with Arab culture and politics” (2). Additionally, from 1967 war until the September 11th Acts and beyond, Arab Americans have been
obliged to “grapple with their identity and with the ‘write or be written’ imperative: Define yourself or others will define you” (2).

Helen Samhan, an Arab American writer, claims that this period saw the beginnings of what can be seen as the contemporary “political racism” against Arab American individuals (qtd. in Majaj 2). Obviously, Palestine was the core flashpoint, as many Arab American writers who criticized Israel were censored or denigrated (Majaj 3). Majaj describes these writers’ attempts to challenge negative political conditions and to hold onto their identity. The writer argues that after 1967, writers “gave voice to a quest for self-identification that was particularly compelling because of its American idiom” (3). She adds that these writers were referencing an American interest in free verse and in the lyric poem, and she points to authors such as Sam Hazo, Sam Hamod, and Jack Marshall for their use of these forms to comment on Arab identity and on “what had been lost during the generations of assimilation” (3). For example, Hamod was one of the first Arab American writers to tackle the Muslim Arab American experience, and Eugene Paul Nassar, in his Wind of the Land, narrated “Lebanese ethnic experience and [preserved] it from the erasure of time and assimilation” (3). Majaj notes that there was a tendency to employ nostalgia in the writings of Arab American writers in this period, as authors tried to assert their Arab American identity as a valuable thing and return to the traditions of the past, especially as authors such as Nassar and Hamod “made a significant intervention in the invisibility of Arab identity, but they also inscribed a nostalgia for patriarchal structures” (3).

It was during this period that some authors began to write coming of age narratives, especially as many of the themes inherent in this genre focus on the way that
young people are impacted by their cultural inheritance. As Majaj notes, “the dilemma of identification options is explored more fully in contemporary Arab-American novels, which feature protagonists with Arab fathers and American mothers. Stymied by the complexities of their mixed identities and the inability of those around them to understand that complexity, the protagonists struggle to find homes for themselves between Arab and American cultures” (7). Majaj points out the manner in which authors in the 1960s and 1970s seemed to fall into two camps: “for some, Arab-American literature will always be about the narrative of leaving behind one identity and acquiring a new one. For others, Arab-American literature takes its place on a global canvas, as one component of a worldwide Arab diaspora in which cultural ties can be reinvigorated. (12).

Kaldas and Mattawa explain that by 1960s, the term “Arab” was not favored by some Arab American writers such as Salom Rizk, who in his Syrian Yankee, “never mentions that the language he spoke at home was Arabic. Upon returning to Lebanon for a brief visit, the narrator describes his own people in the most derogatory terms and is relieved when he at last leaves them to their misery” (x). Similarly, William Blatty’s Which Way to Mecca, Jack? “is filled with so much self-hatred that it is a truly painful read. The narrator, in his longing to be an Irishman, in his derogatory portrayal of his mother, and in his acceptance of racist stereotypes, provides a testament to the pressures exerted by American mainstream culture on the non-whites living within it” (x). However, by the end of 1967, the Arab-Israeli war and the Civil Rights movement contributed to some Arab American authors’ decisions to “claim their ancestral links” (x). In short, contemporary Arab American literature emerges out of a literary tradition
established in the 1960s by authors who were interested in putting forward the concerns of a population that was trying to see itself in more unified terms.

In her description of today’s Arab American literature, Majaj notes that Arab Americans now have their own literature which reflects both ethnic identity and their literary voice. However, she asserts that Arab American literature is facing many difficulties which make the writers unable to reflect their Arab American identity “with comfort and directness” (2). According to Majaj, problem caused by the exclusion of “Arabs on the basis of race [by courts], popular racism [which] now targets Arabs on the basis of skin color, dress, name, accent and other characteristics...racial profiling in place at U.S. airports and border crossings. Earlier epithets of nigger, dago and spic have transmuted to labels of sand nigger, towelhead, camel jocky and worse” (2, 3).

Ludescher claims that there are two factors that facilitate the growth of contemporary Arab American literature: the first one is the search for literature outside the Anglo-American male literary tradition, which led to the increasing interest in ethnic American writers. The second factor is a political one, in which the political unrest in the Middle East increased the political consciousness for Arab American community, and the writers were occupied with “putting a human face on the Arab American immigrant population” (106).

It is important to note that many contemporary Arab American writers have experimented with literary genres other than poetry and have primarily focused on the memoir – a genre that has also become an important aspect of the US literary scene in general. Ludescher claims that “this transformation will require, among other things, the adoption of new literary genres, a new sophisticated form of literary analysis, and the
courage to engage in communal self-criticism” (107, 108). Kaldas and Mattawa concur with Ludescher, observing that Arab American writers have often avoided writing fiction and prose because they “may have wished to exert greater control over the representation of their community. The narrative elements in their poetry were mediated through the exertion of the poet’s subjectivity that lyric poetry has traditionally demanded” (xi).

In his article entitled “The Arab American Novel,” Orfalea discusses whether the Arab American novel is the novel that touches on the Middle Eastern perspective or the one that is written by an Arab American author about an Arab American protagonist (119). The writer notes that the Arab American novel focuses on various themes that include war, love, want, and “a passion for belonging and longing…, the primacy of the journey to find one’s fate, to seek patrimony, to understand who one is” (127). Additionally, the writer tries to define who the Arab American author is and finds that he/she is “a gathering of stained glass, fractured, yet full of light and color, no one tile telling the whole story, no one emotion or belief telling all of it” (127).

Kaldas and Mattawa point out the increased treatment of Arab Americans in the US media has resulted in a higher profile for Arab American authors, especially in light of the Gulf War, the September 11th Acts, and the Iraq War: “‘Arab American’ began to rattle easily off the lips of pundits and news reporters. This attention has perpetuated acts of hostility that, though never highly publicized, have occurred with every crisis in the Middle East, beginning with the American hostage crisis in Iran in 1979” (ix). As a result, Arab Americans have become visible; they “are beginning to be touted as political block or a group to be consulted on issues related to multiculturalism or foreign policy” (ix).
Hassan and Knopf-Newman argue that the study of Arab American literature should be understood in light of the political situation in the Middle East, such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, “the rise of militant Islamic movements, [and] the war against Iraq” (10). The writers refer to Nadine Naber’s claim that “‘what distinguishes this new racism (which is based upon politics) from traditional forms of racism (which are based upon biology or phenotype) is that Arab Americans who choose to be active in Palestinian or Arab issues or organizations may be subjected to political racism, whereas those who choose not to be politically active may not’” (qtd. in Hassan and Knopf-Newman 10).

Hassan and Knopf-Newman argue that the US “War on Terror” has a positive influence on Arab American literature, as critics have begun writing about Arab Americans in US ethnic literature, incorporating “panels on Arab American culture into national conferences, and [publishing] edited volumes on the histories of Arab Americans” (3). The writers state that before September 11, 2001, most Arab American writings were invisible and marginalized. In their work to collect articles for special issue devoted to Arab American literature for the journal MELUS, Hassan and Knopf-Newman faced a problem of finding articles about the definition of Arab American, leading them to write about the “problematics of ethnic or cultural hyphenation for Arab Americans. In the multiculturalist context of the contemporary US, the hyphen in a term such as ‘Arab-American’ ostensibly serves to bridge racial otherness or to naturalize the alien, but its effect is political accommodation within the nation)”(4). The writers refer to Ella Shohat’s claim that Arab American literature should be studied in relation with other ethnic literatures in the United States, but they think that Arab American literary production
should be studied in light of “the concerns and issues that have become central to Arab American cultural politics” (6), in which Arab American literature should be studied in relation to the American policies “at home and abroad” (6).

Ludescher claims that contemporary Arab American literature, including texts written about adolescence, is characterized by the writer as “embracing Arab American ethnicity” (103), through the process of seeing how other ethnic American authors have done so in their works. For instance, Ludescher refers to the critic Lisa Suhair Majaj’s article “Two Worlds Emerging: Arab-American Writing at the Crossroads,” in which she discusses the difficulties she faced because of belonging to both an American mother and a Palestinian father growing up in Jordan. When she traveled to America to get her education, she had the sense of marginalization and alienation in both American and Jordanian societies. Majaj was influenced by reading about the work of Chinese American author Maxine Hong Kingston and Native American poet Joy Harjo and started to look for Arab American writers to help her “meld the disparate aspects of her own identity” (Ludescher 103), but she did not find them because they were categorized under diverse ethnic categories, such as Lebanese, Syrian...etc. She was shocked at not finding much criticism on this subject, so she claims in her article “‘Arab-American literature’ as a category was almost completely absent from listings of immigrant and ethnic-American literature” (69).

Ludescher discusses the main issues and challenges facing Arab American writers today, in which “the question of what constitutes Arab American literature” (106) is considered a big problem because of the diversity of Arab Americans and their belonging to different generations and immigrant groups. Ludescher asks, “should Arab American
writers focus on the Arab side of experience, emphasizing the traditions and values of the
Arab world, or should they focus on the American side of experience, emphasizing
American immigrant experience in the context of multiculturalism?” (106).

Additionally, Ludescher claims that another problem facing Arab American
writers is how to deal with September 11th terrorist attacks, in which Arab American
writers felt that all their previous efforts to correct and to improve the image of Arabs had
failed. Some Arab American writers argue that they do not need to defend themselves for
the American public because they do not support the views of the terrorists. Others feel
that Arab American writers should exert their efforts to prevent a racist backlash and not
to be allied with the Arab political discourse (107).

Given that most of the key texts in contemporary Arab American literature are
written by women writers, it should be noted that these writers reflect the difficulties they
face because of their feelings of gender discrimination and their sense of possessing
hybrid identities or hyphenated identities. These writers depict characters’ sense of being
both Arab and American, yet being completely neither Arab nor American. As
Abdelrazeq points out, “the writers resist both the East’s and the West’s perceptions of
them. They resist both the East with its oppressive regimes as well as the West which
sees them as domesticated and unenlightened other. They oppose American feminist
discourse that looks at the Arab women’s problems such as the veil from the Western
point of view” (2). Most importantly, many of these women writers disagree with those
American feminists who claim that the reason for Arab women’s oppression is solely
religious; they insist that their problems come from “patriarchal values that have complex
social and political roots leading to limit their agency” (4). Before discussing specific
authors who comprise this group, it would be useful to provide background information on Arab American feminism, especially as most prominent Arab American authors have used feminist ideas as a launching pad for their own work.

Hatem traces the history of Arab American feminism prior to the Gulf War, noting that the Arab-Israeli conflict shaped Arab American political consciousness, causing Arab Americans to establish organizations that expressed their voices and defend their rights – organizations like the National Association for Arab Americans (NAAA) and The American-Arab Anti Discrimination Committee (ADC) (1).

Arab American women’s attempts to mobilize against the Israeli war on Lebanon in 1982 met with resistance, and led Arab American women leaders to feel that they were treated as “an inferior other” by US feminists and otherwise sympathetic political allies. Their frustration was the reason behind the creation of the Feminist Arab-American Network in 1983 which worked on increasing “public awareness of issues affecting Arab American feminists, [eliminating] negative stereotypes of Arabs particularly within the American feminist community … and [sharing] resources and support among ourselves” (2). Additionally, the Hatem argues that Arab American women were collectively rejected and less-recognized, especially during the 1984 presidential campaign when “the Democratic contender, Walter Mondale, returned campaign contributions from Arab Americans” (2). According to the writer, this event led “to the creation in 1985 of the Arab American Institute whose goal was to work towards greater Arab American participation in the U.S. political system” (2).

Hatem discusses the influence of the Gulf war on Arab-American women’s roles, in which “the war and the anti-Arab attacks against the community that accompanied it
made it possible for U.S. and Arab American institutions not to acknowledge or to react
to sexist actions and views that affected Arab American women. The problems that were
specific to women went largely unacknowledged, unreported, and unaddressed” (6). The
writer claims that the war reinforced gendered roles between Arab American men and
women during the crisis, as women took care of traumatized families, while men
enhanced their “patriarchal control of community agendas” (6).

After the end of Gulf War, Arab American feminists were divided into two
groups: Abinader identifies the first group as Arab American feminists who “internalized
U.S. views of Arab culture as patriarchal/ restrictive and of Arab women as its
submissive victims and legitimate objects of U.S. criticism and attack. Assimilation into
U.S. society [was] seen as a means of combating Arab sexism and of claiming for Arab
American women the privileged status of Western feminists” (7).

The second group were Arab-American feminists who claimed that due to the
discrimination against Arab Americans in the American community, Arab Americans
found it difficult to assimilate in mainstream US culture; they were identified and treated
as “people of color and that some of their struggles with the hegemonic culture that …
devalued them [were] similar to the experiences of other minorities” (7). Thus, Hatem
concludes that

“This self-conscious definition of Arab Americans and Arab American women as
members of an ethnic minority represents a break with older attitudes and
strategies. It represents a new emphasis on their hybrid cultural character as at
once Arab and American. The Arab component is not only shaped by the past and
present history of their countries of origin, their diverse ethnic/cultural traditions,
but also by the history of Arabs’ immigration to the U.S. and the positions they occupy here… Arab American feminism has not sat comfortably within either of these cultures. It offers a hybrid perspective with all that this adjective signifies: the ambiguous cultural character, the multiple cultural mutations, and the equally diverse politics. As such, it promises a conscious double critique of both the Arab and the American determinants of women’s experience/identity. By focusing on the analysis of the "conflicted interaction of Arab and American cultures" (53) and the particular forms of intersection between sexism and anti-Arab racism, *Food for Our Grandmothers* promises a new agenda” (7).

As a result, many contemporary Arab-American women have made connections with other minority groups because of the same experiences of discrimination between these groups and Arab Americans and of their anti-war attitudes that are based on their conviction of the high cost of the war on the American people. Thus, a new generation of Arab-American feminists is pondering “the impact that the war had on their community and other communities of color, began to develop a new discourse that theorizes the similarities and differences that they shared with women of color” (8).

Benitto studies Arab American women’s integration into American society and their relation with the host culture. The writer notes that there are two different tendencies among Arab American women in terms of dealing with the American society, in which there is a tendency “to forge a new identity that is deep-rooted in the Arab culture, but with a declared belonging to the host society. On the other hand, there is a tendency of restraint and isolation. This choice of restraint and isolation is sometimes allotted to the ambivalent feelings generated by cultural disparity and stubborn
attachment to certain values and traditions” (20). The writer divides Arab American women into two categories in terms of their relationships with other races: the first category includes Arab women who “appropriate cultural singularity as the only alternative to assimilation and cultural homogenization which, for many of them, are perceived as immediate dangers of identity loss” (31). These women are tied to their Arab identity with its religious and cultural dimensions. “The fear of dissolution of their cultural difference, the assumption of cultural symbols and rituals and the socialization in an Arab environment respond to the need to make this difference and identity visible” (32). Thus, these women “embrace an Arab and Islamic identity as an attempt to distinguish themselves from western society, a society deplored as a disordered one where the family is fragmented and women’s bodies are exhibited as objects” (32). The writer quotes one Arab American woman’s experience that represents this tendency: “our cultural values and traditions are different from those of most American people. They tolerate drinking, relations without marriage, I do not want my kids to get these bad habits, obedience and respect for parents is very important. I feel concerned and worried about education of my kids; they have to be dutiful with submissive behavior to our religion and culture…” (qtd. in Benitto 26).

The second category of Arab American feminists is “engaged in a process of identity reconstruction in an endeavor to adapt to the new cultural environment…, [a]dvocating the preservation of cultural specificity is associated with identification with the mainstream society” (32). In other words, this category of Arab American women are more open to negotiating with American culture and creating an identity that is a mixture of Arab traditions and western values. According to the writer, although religion and
cultural identity influence these women’s viewpoints, there are some women in this
category who do not care for religion and cultural identity; they adopt a new liberal
identity that is not influenced by the religious and cultural identity (32). The writer notes
that

Cultural assimilation is greater among Arab women with longer exposure to the
norms of the host society and relations with mainstream society differ among
them. Those born in the Arab world have kinship networks and an attachment to
indigenous cultural norms with an inclination to associate mostly with people
from their ethnic group. Native born Arab women, on the contrary, shift from this
tendency to adopt a more progressive attitude in their intergroup contacts. Arab
women’s relation with mainstream society is affected by their degree of ethnic
identification and religiosity, given that Arab kinship networks and religious
circles tend to favor a more conservative attitude. (32)

The writer notes that there are some Arab American women who are adhered to
their Arab culture while they are integrated in the American culture, he calls this
“hybridization,” in which “there is an inclination towards the adoption of some cultural
traits of the mainstream society’s culture and a desire to simultaneously retain the Arab
culture...hybridization... promotes assimilation and acculturation that encourage the
incorporation of positive Arab and western cultural traits...change is no longer seen as an
evil, but rather as a vital necessity” (28), The writer quotes an Arab American woman
Hoda’s comment on this hybrid identity “we are supposed to keep our tradition, but I do
not see contradiction in identifying as an Arab, with being in this country and identifying
with the values and traditions of this country. There is not really any contradiction; rather
it is luck to be enriched by the fact that you combine the two cultures” (qtd. in Benitto 28).

Sweis examines the identity development processes of Arab American women. The writer notes that Arab American women’s ethnic identity is strengthened by their negative experiences with the American society. The women in the study reject the official racial classification as White. The writer also finds that “womanhood was defined by the ability to resist tradition while upholding respect, and true identity was an outgrowth of being able to embrace both the Arab and the American cultures” (Abstract).

Abdelkader depicts how Arab/Arab American women are caught between the East which views feminism as a “Western colonial ‘cultural transplant’ and the West which views Arab women as ‘oppressed.’” In other words, the writer argues that “The status of Arab women in their communities is often misrepresented, both within and outside the Arab community. All too often, Arab women are categorized in stereotypical roles — ranging from the hopeless, oppressed figure to the sexy pop star”. The writer questions the negative depiction of hijab as “repressed” whereas “a covered nun, bride, Amish woman, and religious Jewish woman are seen as “devout”” (Arab News 2007).

Haddad, a famous Arab American feminist, claims that Arab American women became victims of anti-Arab racism in America and suffered from the negative depictions of Arabs as “lazy,” “camel rider,” “desert nigger,” and “camel jokey” (21). The writer argues that Palestinians have been depicted in American media as “terrorist,” and Muslim as “religious fanatics” (21). What is important in Haddad’s article is her claim that American media and American feminists depict Arab women as “they are forced to wear veils, forced to marry at young ages, subjected to genital mutilation, and subject to the
sexual demands of lecherous husbands in polygamous settings” (21). Haddad defends Arab American women through highlighting many facts American feminists might be unaware of:

That veiling pre-dates Islam, and was practiced by Persians and Byzantine women—including upper class Christians...Arab feminists have figured prominently in Arab nationalist struggles for independence demonstrating in the streets, and even serving as soldiers...While Western women of the 8th, 9th, and 10th centuries had no rights under Roman law their counterparts in the Arab world served as businesswomen, doctors, nurses, theologians, engineers and soldiers...While American feminists are witnessing the painful death of the ERA in 1982, the principle of sex equality is written into the Constitution and National Charters of a number of Arab nations...Palestinian women, who serve as heads of house-holds and single parents, are regarded by Arab feminists as “torchbearers” for women’s emancipation (21)

At the end of her article, Haddad calls for solidarity between American feminists and Arab/Arab American feminists, in which she highlights the importance of the reading about Arab history and past by American feminists through going “beyond traditional and visible sources of information” (21).

Kaldas and Mattawa also note that Arab American narrative has begun to emerge recently because of authors’ “sense of urgency and confidence as well as a deeper ethnic feminist consciousness” (xi). They refer to the critic Lisa Suhair Majaj’s comment that “it is noticeable, for instance, that the growing emergence of a body of feminist Arab American writing corresponds with a shift toward prose writing, fiction as well as
nonfiction. It is as if the turn away from nostalgic celebration toward more rigorous and self-critical explorations mandates a move away from the lyric compression of poetry toward the more expansive and explanatory medium of prose” (qtd. In Kaldas and Mattawa xi).

Most Arab American literature depicting female adolescence is semi-autobiographical in nature. Hassan discusses the role of the genre of autobiography in Arab American literature in reflecting Arab American identity. The writer notes that Arab-American autobiography is constrained by two requirements: “first, that it constructs a selfhood that is intelligible in light of American paradigms of subjectivity, and second, that it address Western ideas about Arabs, Muslims, Middle Easterners” (11). Thus, Arab American writers in their autobiographies try to reflect their individuality, freedom, and independence which are the outcomes of American individualism, and at the same time, these writers reflect their cultural values, Islamic rituals, and Middle East’ political conflicts (10). Many of these authors, including the ones I treat in this study, see themselves as mediators between two cultures.

Similarly, Cherif thinks that Arab American women writers reflect their femaleness and self through relying on their gendered memory, in which, for example, the writers Abinader and Abu-Jaber “investigate the interconnectedness of the past and the present in the making of the Arab American female self and create a space of self-invention for Arab American women where they negotiate a new sense of self in the layers of a buried ethnic and female past...[they use memory] in order to examine the implications of their own ambivalent perceptions of self and to devise a constructive way of dealing with the present” (208).
Additionally, Shakir claims that both early and late Arab American writers use autobiography as a way to challenge the Western assumptions about the Arab world and to assert their values (6). In a recent interview, author Naomi Shihab Nye emphasizes this point, noting: “My goals have always been to make wonderful voices available to more readers, to promote poems of humanity and intelligence that extend and connect us all as human beings, to enlarge readers' horizons-including my own, as I work on the bookstand to help connect people” (233).

Most of the characters in novels written by Arab American women writers are young women who search for and struggle to claim an Arab identity while trying not to be marginalized by American society. Arab American teenage girls are portrayed as deeply ambivalent characters who pose a series of questions regarding their hybrid identities: they wonder about the importance of “acculturation,” which is the adaptation process of immigrant populations in a new culture; they ask whether the adaptation to a new culture means losing oneself or giving up one’s own values.

The protagonists in Arab American literature written by women writers suffer from a sense of loss and displacement, living in two worlds and yet belonging to neither. They look for a sense of home where they can belong, and they are caught between the American culture which views them as the other and the Arab culture which puts restrictive limits on them. Their hyphenated identity is influenced by the fact that many Americans view Arabs as inferior and the other, by the writers’ experiences of exile and dislocation in which these writers have their hyphenated identities. In short, Arab American young adults have not any choice but to live in the border zone, in the third
place, in-between Arab and American cultures. They have the feelings of “other” and the “same,” in which they play the role of insiders and outsiders in American society.

One of the main themes in Arab American literature written by women writers is this sense of possessing a hyphenated identity. Sharobeem defines the hyphenated identity as “a term that implies a dual identity, an ethnocultural one, and evokes questions and debates regarding which side of the hyphen the person belongs to. Such questions often loom large in the minds of immigrants, those who leave one country for another, one culture for the other” (1). The writer argues that the literature which reflects the hyphenated identity is always multicultural one and exists in the countries which have many immigrants and races, in which the immigrants adapt their old values to the hosting culture (1). What the writer notes in her discussion of the hyphenated identity is that the immigrants’ generations start to “take and show pride in their ancestral past and insist on demonstrating their dual identitites. This ancestral past and culture is influenced by the American culture, so this results in having a “hyphenated identity” which is a characteristic of the American culture. The writer refers to Maha El Said’s claim that this “ethnic revival is fundamentally based on a search for one’s roots, a search for ancestral links, a search for a group to belong to creating a self that has a continuity between past and present” (qtd. in Sharobeem 1). The writer thinks that this kind of identity is the reason behind the emergence of the ethnic literature in the United States, in which there are “the African-Americans, Asian-Americans, Italian-Americans...Arab-Americans” (1). Complicating this search for identity is what Arab American poet Naomi Shihab Nye describes as “a tension between Arab communal values and the individualism and
freedom America is seen to offer...It is a tension not resolved so much as honored” (qtd. in Gabriel 2001).

Arab American women authors therefore depict young female protagonists who try to establish their cultural identity and personality within “the social context of conflicting roles and values” (Kazaleh 2). They are influenced by the family conflicts at home and discrimination at school or on the job that create psychological problems for them and negatively affect their acculturation, identity formation, and assimilation in the American society (Patel 1, 2; Wray-Lake et al. 85; Amato and Afifi 222; Flanagan et al. 500).

The concept of negotiation in contemporary Arab American women’s literature can be defined as the protagonists’ attempts to stake out a place for themselves within the power structures of their families in order to gain their own sense of identity. Negotiation itself is not an action that most Arab young women are encouraged to practice; however, young women who either immigrate to the US or are born in the US to Arab immigrant parents, are exposed to a society in which young women often negotiate with their elders. The authors I feature in this study privilege those female characters who learn to master negotiation and use it to build a bridge between themselves and their families and use it to carve out meaningful identities for themselves. In chapter four, I will explore this pattern in two texts written for a mainstream audience, Evelyn Shakir’s *Remember Me to Lebanon* and Leila Halaby’s *West of the Jordan*, and in chapter five, I will trace this pattern in Alicia Erian’s *Towelhead*, making note of the strategies that Erian uses, given that her intended audience is comprised of young readers. It is my contention that these Arab American writers hold out the principle of negotiation as a way for Arab American
young women to succeed in a social system that presents challenges both at home and in the public realm.
CHAPTER FOUR
NEGOTIATION AND SELF-ACTUALIZATION IN SHAKIR’S REMEMBER ME TO LEBANON AND HALABY’S WEST OF THE JORDAN

This chapter focuses on how the young female protagonists in Evelyn Shakir’s Remember Me to Lebanon and in Laila Halaby’s West of the Jordan engage in negotiations with their families and love interests in order to overcome generational conflict and to build identities that enable them to become “self-actualized” women.

One of the first psychologists to discuss self-actualization was Abraham Maslow, who defined “self-actualization” as “the desire to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming” (Maslow and Stephens 1). For the purposes of this study, I have followed a basic definition self-actualized people as individuals who possess a sense of autonomy or independence (Motivation 212, 213); they “are spontaneous in their internal thoughts and outward behavior. While they can conform to rules and social expectations, they also tend to be open and unconventional…they tend to view the world with a continual sense of wonder and awe” (Cherry 2011); they have the ability to love (Toward 157); they aspire for freedom and independence; they have “[the] ability to discriminate between ‘means and ends’…resistance to enculturation…self-respect, self-esteem, the ‘esteem of others’… ‘confidence in the face of the world’… (Motivation 90-226)...[i]increased integration, wholeness, and unity of the person” (Toward 91). Finally, self-actualized people “have realistic perceptions of themselves, others and the world around them” (Cherry n. pag.).
Maslow highlights the idea that a human’s growth “has not only rewards and pleasures but also many intrinsic pains” (Toward 204), seeing self-actualization as a “dialectic between growth-fostering forces and growth-discouraging forces” (205). This aspect of his theory is of particular use in my argument because I wish to put forward the claim that Arab American texts that focus on young women’s development typically portray the road to self-actualization as a difficult one – one in which the protagonist must negotiate with power structures, a process that can be both painful and rewarding, as I will demonstrate.

Additionally, self-actualization reflects an individual’s personal growth in which there is a need to fulfill her aspirations, abilities, and talents and to realize her potential. It is related to the person’s need to fulfill what is missing in her personality, as the need for a sense of independence, freedom, self-esteem, and a stable identity motivates the person to fulfill these needs. Thus, self-actualization is an ongoing process of personal growth and development.

Since the meaning of self-actualization implies the protagonist’s struggle to fulfill his/her needs and potential, it is not surprising that the protagonists in Shakir and Halaby’s novels attempt to become self-actualized through negotiating with the power structures in their lives, especially the power that resides in their immigrant or second generation immigrant parents. These characters have tense relationships with their parents, who view self-actualization as equating to the complete adherence to Arab traditions. Often, these parents ignore that a great part of the protagonists’ experience has taken place within an American context. The generational gap is therefore due to the protagonists’ desire to be self-actualized through a mingling of their Arab and American
identities. When these protagonists are only able to follow their parents’ ideas about self-actualization, they demonstrate low self-esteem, and they come to realize that they must react against their parents’ desires for them by negotiating a middle ground. Those protagonists who are successful form a stable identity and thus become autonomous and free – self-actualized. Other negotiations, with female friends and boyfriends serve a similar purpose, as protagonists defend some aspects of their Arab culture, especially in contexts where their friends think that self-actualization only means acting like an “American.” In short, these protagonists refuse to be conventional like their parents or conformist like their friends; they want to form their personal identity without sacrificing either cultural influence.

Evelyn Shakir’s *Remember Me to Lebanon* depicts the stories of Lebanese girls and women who suffer from the complexity of generational conflict in their formation of a self-actualized identity. Shakir, an author and critic, draws upon her own experiences as a Lebanese-American to join those second-generation Arab American writers who reflect in their texts the belief that the first generation does not have an identity crisis because they have a strong feeling of their roots and traditions: “They may have difficulties in the new country. They may have conflicts, but their sense of identity is pretty strong. They know where they came from” (Elmasry 2007). According to Shakir and her fellow second generation writers, they tend “to be caught between two cultures, two traditions. They are trying to bridge that gap” (Elmasry 2007). In her text, Shakir tries to relate the problem of the second generation to the political situation in Lebanon, in which the Lebanese civil war separates the immigrants’ children from their roots and parents and broadens the gap between the two generations.
Shakir considers the impact of generational conflict on the identity development in “The Story of Young Ali” and “Oh, Lebanon.” She puts forward the repeated claim that in order to become a self-actualized person, an Arab American young woman must learn to negotiate strongly on her own behalf – be it with grandparents, parents, or potential love interests. In each of these stories, Shakir sets out the conflict that each protagonist faces and then shows how they start to navigate a discussion with their parents in an attempt to find a compromise between their needs and their parents’ expectations. They do not show their parents their needs directly, but their discussion with them reflects how they view things according to their familiarity with American culture.

Prior to developing the ability to negotiate well, the protagonists in Shakir’s stories have tense relationships because their parents or grandparents want them only to follow Arab traditions; their challenge is to develop negotiation skills that will enable them to argue their case. For instance, in “The Story of Young Ali,” Rima, the teenaged protagonist, must learn how to negotiate with her father’s first generation sensibilities regarding issues of gender. Like most young protagonists in Arab American novels, Rima struggles with her father’s will to impose Arab traditions and values on her. She is bored with her father’s insistence on teaching her Arab traditions and values. Additionally, she is confused between her Arab and American identities, as she views her father’s teaching of Arab traditions from a largely American point of view. Thus, the tension between Rima and her father is based on her father’s attempt to root Arab traditions in her mind and to her resistance to understanding and accepting these traditions because of the conflict between her American and Arabic cultural influences.
From the beginning of the story, Rima complains of her father’s insistence on teaching her Lebanese traditions regarding, among other things, modesty. As Rima reflects, “When he’s hurt my feelings or I’m in a mood, I try to spell things out for him the best I can...you’re a man, Baba, so I know you don’t notice...You don’t have to worry about me and boys and stuff, I’m not stupid...I do so remember my manners” (1). The protagonist here depicts her awareness of the traditional and cultural limitations placed on her by her father. She is fed up with the assumed superiority of men in Arab culture. Additionally, Rima realizes the importance of the culture of honor to the Lebanese, in which premarital relationships between boys and girls are prohibited and are considered shameful. Her father certainly underscores that point: “‘In the old country,’ he says, and tells me how it’s cousin and cousin against the world, good girls don’t hang out with boys, children pay attention” (1). All of these traditional values in Arab culture become old-fashioned ones for the protagonist because she has grown up in the US and adopted many of its cultural values.

“The Story of Young Ali” contains an embedded narrative that becomes a point of struggle between Rima and her father. I see the use of the embedded narrative technique by Shakir as representing her decision to reinscribe a patriarchal tale inside a feminist text. “The Story of Young Ali” is a traditional Bedouin tale that revolves around Ali and his tribe, which is headed by Sheikh Hamid. Ali and his uncle Sheikh Hamid visit another tribe to thank the parents of a girl for her honesty. They are warmly and generously welcomed by the girl’s tribe for the customary three days. Then the girl’s father offers his daughter to Sheikh Hamid as wife in a sign of generosity, even though the girl is in love with her cousin. During the wedding ceremony, the girl’s cousin arrives to ask Ali to
offer his bride to him because they have loved each other since childhood. As a sign of nobility, Ali agrees to allow the girl to marry her cousin.

Shakir focalizes her story through Rima who learns “The Story of Ali” bit by bit, as she and her father use the text as a point of debate. Rima’s father’s purpose of narrating “The Story of Young Ali” to Rima is to teach her moral lessons from Arab culture. Rima’s assumption at the beginning of the story is that her father’s attitudes towards gender—namely, that men are supposedly superior to women and should make decisions for them—will be reflected in the entirety of the story.

The idea of the superiority of men in this story becomes a point of struggle between Rima and her parents. Her father keeps using his didactic method of teaching her the traditions, in which he tells her “Listen and learn...why does this girl not know our ways?” (2), and her mother asks her to accept her father’s teachings of traditions and to avoid disagreeing with him: “The children belong to the father,” she tells Rima. “He must answer for them before God” (2). On the contrary, Rima is surprised at what she feels to be her mother’s acceptance of her role as an obedient woman to her husband. Her description of her mother’s physical reaction that occurs when Rima talks back to her father is telling: “her head came up, and her eyes opened wide. Blue eyes and her skin is fair, even though she’s hundred percent Lebanese” (2). Here, the protagonist mocks her mother’s double identity and criticizes the way that she acts like a traditional Lebanese woman, although she lives in America.

Rima points out the generational gap between herself and her parents when she describes how her mother, who represents the older generation, adheres to the native traditions and Arabic language: “Mostly she talks to me in Arabic—so does my father—
mostly I talk back in English” (2). Thus, the essence of conflict in this story between Rima and her parents is due to the idea that Rima is influenced by American culture, causing her to question the superiority of male gender and her parents’ didactic way of teaching moral lessons.

As part of their discussion of the story, Rima argues with her father over one of Ali’s decisions, and she uses the phrase “common sense” to indicate the norm she believes that Ali should have been following as he made decisions, but her father is not convinced and mocks her opinion by saying that she has “the sense of people with small minds, not heroes” (4). Thus, he describes Rima’s mind as a small mind, demonstrating that to do otherwise would be to disrespect his own values and way of thinking.

Additionally, Rima criticizes Ali’s lying to his people and to his uncle in order to avoid an awkward social situation. While Ali’s lie is what most people might characterize as a “white lie,” Rima picks up on it and considers it to be a serious failing: “How come it’s okay to lie to the uncle?” (5), she asks her father, and her father is surprised at her thinking: “Ya Allah, what lie!” (5). This contradiction of viewpoints between Rima and her father over the issue of lying reflects the generational gap between them. Her father thinks that Ali’s intention is not to deceive his uncle because he has a pure heart. In other words, he justifies lying here because it has a good purpose: “Does Ali intend to deceive his uncle?” he asks her. “No. Does he want to please him? Yes...The young man’s heart is pure as spring water, his soul is white as the meat of a turnip” (5). He mocks what he feels to be Rima’s superficial thinking and her inability to understand the reason behind Ali’s behavior: “My daughter...You see the flea and not the camel. I begin to wonder, how do you get those A’s in school” (5).
Rima is fed up with her father’s method of teaching her traditions and feels that it undermirs her personality. She refers to her father’s assessment that “she listens but she doesn’t comprehend” (4) as a reason for her low self-esteem: “I made up my mind. Let him read, I wouldn’t say another word. But if I grew up with low self-esteem, which is one of the worst things that can happen to a person, he’d only have himself to blame” (4). Despite this feeling, Rima realizes that she must learn to negotiate with her father if there is to be peace in her family and in her life. She has to try to reconcile her American attitudes with her parents’ Lebanese ones.

The next time they take up a discussion of the story, the tension between Rima and her father begins to decrease as Rima meets her father part way by trying to read more deeply into the story’s nuances. When confronted with a scene in which gold is used for its symbolic value, Rima says to her father “[it] doesn’t just mean gold. It’s a symbol. It stands for something else. For instance, being famous or anything a person sets their heart on…the whole point of the story is to give up the thing you want” (7). Rima relates what she has just done to something she does regularly in her academic studies. She tells her father: “That’s what my English teacher calls an ‘insight.’”

Rima’s approach appears to work; her father seems very supportive of her when she thinks deeply; he even likens Rima to his father who was a philosopher and knowledgeable in his village. Rima recounts his reaction: “‘You may recall,’ he said to my mother, ‘that my father’s father, though he could not write his name, was known in our village and nearby as a philosopher. It seems this girl takes after him’” (8). What is clear is that Rima’s father values careful thought more than anything else, and when Rima can demonstrate this quality, he is happy.
Polygamy is another issue that arises in Rima’s father’s telling of “The Story of Young Ali” and tests Rima’s negotiation skills. Although Ali is already married, Sheikh Hamid offers the girl to him to become his second wife – in other words, he passes her on from the tribal elder directly to Ali. Rima dwells on this fact, especially because her sense of American culture does not allow her to accept the idea of being a bigamist: “Baba...Ali already has a wife...Baba, they’re handing the poor girl off like a baton” (14). Rima’s father counters that he thinks Rima focuses on a custom that has gone out of favor in modern times, rather than focusing on the intent within the culture portrayed in the story: “My daughter, do not reject the pot of rice because of one burned kernel” (14), he says. Importantly though, he seems to agree with Rima’s sense that the arrangement would not be appropriate in modern times.

The conflict of viewpoints between Rima and her father in “The Story of Young Ali” ends when Rima sees Ali’s noble behavior with the girl’s male cousin who comes to plead his case regarding his love for the young woman. As Rima’s father tells it, Ali “pulled the wedding cloak off his own shoulders and threw it onto those of the youth, saying, ‘May you find joy in your bride’” (15). At this point, Rima feels excited about the meaning of nobility in Ali’s behavior which is different from what she often witnesses in American culture: “Yeah, that part was cool...Baba, the story was kind of long, but, in the end, it wasn’t bad” (15).

Rima and her father end up compromising. Rima develops the patience to listen and to really think about Lebanese culture and traditions, and her father learns to try to understand her viewpoint. This compromise represents for Shakir an ideal way for the
generations to come together but for each party to remain true to himself or to herself. In many respects, Rima comes to represent the best aspects of a dual identity.

In “Oh, Lebanon,” the unnamed young Muslim Lebanese protagonist attempts to gain her own sense of identity by negotiating with the power structure of her family and of the third generation Lebanese American man whom she is dating. The protagonist has had a difficult childhood in Lebanon because of Lebanon’s civil war, where she witnesses brutality and violence. She goes to the United States to complete her college education, trying to distance herself from her past, her origin, and her original culture.

In the beginning, the protagonist’s description of her father reveals that there is no tension between them, because he seems to be progressive and open-minded, as he accepts her study abroad: “‘My father is brave,’ she thought. It was her comfort. He was also progressive and very rich. So when, at seventeen—ten years into the fighting—she showed him catalogues from American universities, he saw no problem. Felt, in fact, a tinge of pride. Just never noticed she was desperate to escape” (17). However, the turning point in her relationship with her father starts when she meets a black Jamaican in her first semester at MIT and writes to her father about him. Shakir depicts his reaction clearly: “From that day, her father—not that progressive, after all—refused her phone calls and burned her letters without opening them. The hurt she felt became defiance, then resignation. ‘He’ll change his mind some day,’ she thought” (18). The father’s refusal of his daughter’s relationship is due to his expectation that she will marry a Lebanese man – someone within her own ethnic group.

Soon after arriving in the US, however, the protagonist defies her father because of her sense of independence and her freedom of choice; she wants to liberate herself
from Lebanese traditions and to adapt to a new environment and culture in the United States. Her aspirations and desires are opposed by her father who feels that her decision to go with a non-Lebanese man is a violation of their culture. She defies her father’s will by spending the summer in Kingston with her Jamaican boyfriend. As Shakir observes of the protagonist, “at first, she was tentative, but soon she fell in with the rhythms of the place—calypso, reggae, the spirit of his parents’ teasing” (18). The protagonist wants to prove the uniqueness of her personality and that her will is stronger than her father’s will; she also tries to escape her tragic memories of the Lebanese war by immersing herself in Jamaican culture.

The memory of the brutal Lebanese civil war influences the protagonist’s psyche and identity; she is confused about how to find a safe place away her father’s authority, the political unrest in Lebanon, and the power of Arab traditions: “in bed, she tossed and dreamed of Beirut, rockets turning night to day, a teenage sniper ogling her from the roof across the street” (18). Initially, she thinks, “I could live here forever” (18), but when she hears about the news of crimes in Kingston which remind her of the Lebanese civil war crimes, she changes her mind and ends her relationship with him: “I can’t live like this,’ she told him” (18). This change in the protagonist’s decision is due to her belief that her boyfriend is a traditional man, like her father, who wants to live in his town without moving to another place, even when that town is filled with violence.

After returning to Boston from Kingston, the protagonist engages in a number of relationships that are fleeting and unsatisfying. She is desperate to have an everlasting love relationship: “her youth was gone, frittered away on men who had, each in his own way, been wrong for her” (19). Eventually, she tries a dating agency and meets a man
described to her by the agent as “three parts Lebanese, the great-grandson of immigrants from Tripoli in the north” (21, 22). The protagonist’s decision to try this relationship although she is confused whether she is glad or sorry for this choice reflects her sense of difficulty in trying to meld her two cultures.

Initially, the new boyfriend seems interested in learning about Lebanese culture and traditions. As he says to her about her Lebanese background: “It makes a lot of difference...In my family, we’ve lost our Arab culture, and I’m the only one who cares” (23). He disapproves of his family’s assimilation into American culture and seems to be searching for his Arab identity by having a girlfriend from the same culture. The protagonist likes that he is proud of his Arab origin and culture and refers to an important fact that the early Arab immigrants who were Christians assimilated in the American society and labeled themselves as “Christians,” not “Arab” because they wanted to assimilate easily with the American society: “Some Christians in Lebanon—and he was Christian, she knew—refused that label” (23). In other words, the protagonist realizes that her new boyfriend is attached to his Arab culture.

The protagonist seems implicitly attached to her Arab culture and identity, a fact that comes out more when she starts dating someone with Lebanese roots. She is a Muslim but not a devout one, her father is not a devout Muslim although he knows a lot of religious hadith (Prophet Muhammad’s speeches), and her mother is Christian. In interacting with this new boyfriend, she realizes that she “could never spend her life with someone who looked down on Islam or thought that ‘Arab’ was a slur” (23). In fact, she compares her Lebanese American boyfriend to a former boyfriend who was a professor and who “had instructed her always to introduce herself as Phoenician or, if she must, as

99
simply Lebanese. A warning finger raised. ‘Don’t say Arab.’ ‘Why not?’ she’d asked. ‘It doesn’t sound very nice,’ he had explained” (23). Here there is an indication that this professor’s vision represents how Arabs are misunderstood in many segments of American culture. He wants her to avoid discrimination and the negative stereotypes attached to the label “Arab” in the United States, and replaces this label with the historical label “Phoenician” which is related to the origin of the Lebanese. The protagonist seems aware of the Americans’ negative view of Arabs and tries to defend her culture from the negative media stereotypes when she asks the professor, “Have you ever been to Lebanon?...Or to the Middle East”(23). He replies, “No, I’m way overdue” (23). In other words, she tells him that his negative vision of Arabs is based on what he hears from media.

Despite the cultural connection she feels with her new boyfriend, the protagonist wonders if she is really just trying to please her father by dating someone he would approve of. She imagines returning to Beirut with her Lebanese American husband, knowing that her father would be pleased because she has chosen the “right” partner from the same ethnicity, and how he would comment on her relationship with the Jamaican boy, “you were sick with a fever...but, praise Allah, you were well” (23). This imagined reunion with her father unsettles her, especially as she begins to suspect that her new boyfriend may only want her because she is Lebanese.

For instance, he tells her that he wants to find a woman who connects him with his native culture, who makes his kids fluent in Arabic so they do not suffer from bicultural identity crisis: “I have to find a wife to teach my kids-to-be the abc’s of Arabic...’Listen’... ‘Don’t think I’m trying to rush things. I just want you to understand
where I’m coming from, and’—‘I want to know all about you’” (25). In other words, the boyfriend here tries to explain to the protagonist his purpose which is to find his Arab identity by having her as his wife. He wants her as a bridge to connect him with his culture and does not want future children to suffer from the disconnection with their ethnic culture.

Trying to obtain a better understanding of her boyfriend’s motivations, she asks him “It doesn’t bother you my family is Muslim?” (28). She presupposes that her religious identity might be a conflicting point in her relationship with him. However, her boyfriend seems happy that she is a Muslim because he wants to explore his native ethnic and cultural identity: “I love it your family is Muslim” (28). Even he wants to explore her Islamic identity and thinks that it is a sign of her authenticity: “Because it makes you that much more authentic. A card-carrying Arab. I want you to take me to a mosque, I want you to teach me” (28). Here we note that his reply reveals that he is interested in the Arab ethnic identity and that he thinks that the Islamic and Christian religious beliefs are parts of this identity.

The tension in the protagonist’s relationship with her boyfriend starts when she tells him that she does not think that she will take him to the mosque or teach him Islam because she is not strongly adhered to her religious identity. The tension intensifies when her boyfriend asks her “Did you ever think of wearing a scarf?” (28). To her, scarf means “hijab” which has a negative stereotype in American culture, so she tells him “A rag on my head? No, thank you” (28). Here it should be noted that in her refusal to wear hijab and of her replacement of the word “hijab” with the word “rag,” she considers it a stigma, a limit for her freedom and her eagerness to live the American life. It also indicates that
her religious identity is not stable. She has changed her appearance and wants primarily to reflect American dress and manners.

In her apartment, she has an internal conflict regarding her boyfriend’s proposal to her to wear the scarf; she even blames herself for having a relationship with him:

When she got home, she kicked off her shoes and paced from one small room to another. What a fool she’d been, and just when she thought she was growing smart. He was using her, like the others had, except for her sweet Jamaican boy, the only one who’d ever loved her, loved home more, though. Her mind was racing. The others, why had they wanted her? Not for herself, she decided, but smitten by some one thing about her, just as she might love the shimmer of silk in a certain light or the texture of a ripe avocado...But, oh—she started pacing again—Mr. Sheik-of-Araby was the worst. Trying to wrest her into something she wasn’t (28, 29).

Thus, the protagonist starts to change her attitude toward her boyfriend, “Mr Sheik-of-Araby” (29), and she starts a negotiation process with him, designed to learn if he loves her for herself or only for her cultural background. She tells him: “I think we’re a mismatch. That’s all I came to tell you. We look good on paper...But I’m not the woman you want” (29). The scarf is now the point of conflict between them, a symbol of suppressing her freedom and a way to return to her tradition, so she asks him to assure her that he hates her in a scarf in order to change her mind: “Tell me you’d hate me in a scarf” (29).

From this point on, the protagonist tries to test her boyfriend’s treatment of her in the future by outlining her conditions and her refusal to wear a scarf and to be traditional.
Even when he tells her “I’d hate you in a scarf” (29), she pushes him further: “Don’t say it like that...Say it like you mean it” (29). He assures her: “I do mean it...scarf, no scarf, it’s up to you” (30). She continues with her negotiation, insisting on her freedom:

You won’t expect me to roll grape leaves or pickle turnips?...Listen...Don’t think I’m going to recite the Koran five times a day. Or whisper Arabic in your ear at night...Or join the Ladies’ Aid...Of course, I want children...But...it doesn’t follow that I have to tell them the folk tales my father told me about Jeha the fool, or teach them how to dance three kinds of dabka, or how to pickle turnips and eggplant...Because...if there’s one thing I’m not, it’s pious. Or sentimental. I’m not going to fill the house with the music of Fairuz and Umm Kalthum...And you might as well know...I don’t carry around photos of our stone house in the village. And you won’t hear me carrying on over the terraced garden that got blown up in the fighting or the olive trees uprooted, or the mulberry and quince...Or my gorgeous cousin...My cousin Fawzi. He got himself killed trying to cross the green line. And do you know Why he was crossing?...It was love. He had a girlfriend on the other side...

Another thing...This. I will not teach you Arabic” (30, 31).

After hearing this list of conditions, her boyfriend says that he understands her desire to live a freer life: “Understood...I can live with that...” (30). It seems clear that the protagonist’s negotiation with her boyfriend is based upon her past hurt. Her boyfriend notes this and responds compassionately, which suggests that he can come to love her for who she is.
At the end of “Oh, Lebanon,” the protagonist does not want to be loved simply because she fulfills the man’s fantasies of being connected to his homeland. The point of her negotiation with her boyfriend becomes her insistence that he view her as an individual, not as a representation of an imagined way of life. Thus, she does not promise her boyfriend that she will continue their relationship, but she says: “No promises, but let’s give this thing another chance” (32).

Like Shakir, Halaby is interested in considering whether Arab American young women can become self-actualized through negotiating with the power structures present in their families and communities. However, this novel is structured differently, as Halaby depicts interconnected protagonists, cousins of Palestinian descent, who experience differing results in their attempts to become self-actualized. Halaby wants the reader to compare the negotiating opportunities and successes of these young women: Hala, who has grown up in Jordan and immigrates to the US; Soraya, who has grown up in the US, but periodically visits her relatives in Nawara, a village in the West Bank; Khadija, who has also grown up in the US and never traveled abroad; and Mawal, who has never had the opportunity to leave her birthplace of Nawara.

*West of the Jordan* depicts the lives of these four cousins as they struggle with their national, ethnic, and sexual identities. It is a coming of age story about four girls at the brink of maturity who try to define themselves and to find their places in relation to Palestinian, Jordanian, and American cultures. Like Halaby herself, the teen girls she depicts suffer from bicultural identity crisis and loss of homeland. Sarkar claims that this novel represents the “diasporic fiction” which “often revolves around the emigre's or exile's quest for identity in a new cultural space. On one hand, there is a persistent desire
to assimilate to a new way of life. On the other, a poignant sense of nostalgia, a yearning for the homeland, and an incisive pain of displacement and loss are unmistakable in these stories" (264). Thus, Halaby, who is a daughter of a Palestinian father and an American mother, tries to reflect her “hybrid identity” in discussing the “difficulties of a cross-cultural existence” of these teen girls. Abdelrazek claims that the author of the novel tackles the idea of having a hyphenated identity---an identity that has been complicated by living in a hostile environment and living in “borderzone[s]” (x).

While Hala is able to negotiate successfully, her cousins are less successful. The point of this section is to consider why Mawal, Soraya, and Khadija are unable to negotiate their identities, and why Hala is successful in her negotiation. Like Shakir, Halaby ends up rewarding those characters who can best negotiate for themselves and become self-actualized persons.

The only character who is unable to negotiate with her family is Mawal, who has always lived in Nawara. This is due to the fact that she does not have access to a bicultural identity. Halaby uses Mawal as an example of someone who is unable to move beyond negotiating with her family to someone who can act in her mind. When she meets her cousins Hala and Soraya, Mawal feels of the burden of her traditions on her and on her sense of her own sexuality: “My mother has led me to believe that feelings and thoughts such as these (sexual ones) will take me straight to hell…I want to sit in the garden and hike my dress up to my knees so my legs can feel the sun as it kisses them” (148).

Mawal does not hide her wish to visit the United States, but she is restricted by the power of her village’s traditions that do not permit her to go without being married. In
other words, her wish to visit America does not imply that she wants to escape from the power of her traditions, but she wants to see her cousins who live in America: “I want to visit the States one day and see the life all of my cousins are leading that I hear about so much. That won’t happen for a long time, maybe not until I am married” (17). Mawal’s refusal to marry one of her cousins living in America is due to her distrust of the American style and to her belonging to her native traditions. At this point, Mawal seems that she does not have a hyphenated identity like her cousin Hala: “I am not marrying one of those guys who left here when he was a teenager and has been living an American life ever since. I’ve seen their arrogance and I’ve heard stories...I still have to finish high school, and then, if my parents will allow me, I want to go to college and become a teacher like Miss Maryam, who teaches English and Classical Arabic” (17). Thus, Mawal’s identity is related to the vision she formulates in her mind depending on the stories she hears. She accepts her parents’ authority in choosing her major and wants to be connected with her Arabic language and open to understanding English language.

Mawal wants to negotiate her sexuality with her mother and to talk to men: “as summer begins, I want to lie on my back and eat the sky. I want to be mischievous. I want to stare at Miss Maryam’s large pointed breasts, to stand this much closer to the vegetable man who winks, to let him touch my hand when he gives me back my change” (19). However, Mawal’s desire to explore her sexuality is prohibited and restricted by her mother who warns her of meeting a man because it will take her to the hell: “My mother has led me to believe that feelings and thoughts such as these will take me straight to hell, or make me turn out like my untame cousin Soraya, who ate too much cereal when she was young and has the foolishness of an American in her blood, and that may be true but
I don’t much care. I want to sit in the garden and hike my dress up to my knees so my legs can feel the sun as it kisses them” (19). Here it should be noted that Mawal’s mother refuses to negotiate with Mawal’s sexuality because of the power of traditions which prohibits discussing these things.

Additionally, Mawal’s sexuality seems restricted and limited by traditions and her people’s habits, in which her village is a “big mouth”; she notes that the people are so talkative “in the coffee shops that I’m not allowed to enter about the three bowls of fool he ate that morning and how there has never been a louder fart” (19). Mawal here blames the power of traditions in not allowing girls to go to coffee shops. In other words, she hates the subjugation of women by male authority in her culture.

At the end, Mawal reveals her connectedness to the life and nature in Nawara although she cannot understand why she is connected. She accepts God’s will to make her stay in Nawara:

Sometimes there are no stories, only feelings and still no words for those feelings, only pictures—that gray sky is my heart: vast and sick and empty. My own branches are breaking. Why every time when I open my eyes am I still here? That bird is my future, far away and uncertain. Accept that which is God’s will. Accept that which is God’s will. Accept that which...I will accept (206).

In short, Mawal ends up living in her mind rather than acting in the world. Thus, Mawal feels displaced at the end of her story because of her inability to negotiate with her parents to live a freer life and have chances like her cousins’ because of the power of Arab patriarchal traditions she has to live with. However, she accepts God’s will and her fate at the end to live in Nawara.
The shared thread between the next characters, Khadija and Soraya, is that they try to negotiate through their conflicts with their parents, but ultimately, in order to act in the world, they have to deny the Arab part of their identity. To begin, Khadija is terrified by the sexual freedom of her American friends and wounded by her father’s abusive behavior – his tendency is to hit her and to deny her any voice in making decisions about her own life. She cannot negotiate with her father and tries to hide herself under the shadow of his brutal hands to cope with her new life. Sarkar describes her as a girl who “is uncomfortable with her name, has to combat a drunken brutal father and conservative mother, deal with friends who periodically stereotype her as an Arab, and is terrified by the sexual freedom she experiences in America” (265).

Khadija’s first problem is her name which is hard for her classmates at high school to pronounce. Although she is hurt by their teasing, she does not try to negotiate with her classmates over her name – thus it becomes a reflection of her identity crisis, in which she is dislocated and torn between the Arab and American cultures:

In America my name sounds like someone throwing up or falling off a bicycle.

If they can get the first part of it right, the “Kha” part, it comes out like clearing your throat after eating ice-cream. Usually they say kadeeja, though, which sounds clattering clumsy. It never comes out my mother’s soft way; she makes it sound almost pretty (36).

On the other hand, neither does Khadija entirely adhere to an Arab identity: “I am sure the original Khadija was very nice and that’s why Prophet Muhammad married her and why my father gave me her name, but I am also sure that if the original Khadija went to school in America that she would hate her name just as much as I do” (36). As a sign of
her inability to negotiate with her classmates regarding her name, she tries to replace her name with the name “Diana” in front of her American friends in order to get rid of her position in-between cultures and of her displaced identity, but she fails.

Khadija’s second problem lies in her parents’ treatment of her. She suffers from her mother who is a strict and narrow-minded moral instructor, and who only talks “about house things and taking-care-of-your brothers’ things, and sometimes don’t-do-that-or-you’ll-never-marry things” (37). Her mother’s problem is that she wants Khadija to be fully Arab and to be bounded by her Arab traditions: “the majority of immigrant Palestinian women in the United States believe that certain values considered traditional in Western society form the backbone of their culture and deserve the highest respect” (89). She negotiates with her mother trying to identify herself as an Arab American: “Ma, I can’t speak Arabic right, I’ve never even been there, and I don’t like all of those dancing par-daughter” (74). However, her mother insists that Khadija should be fully an Arab: “No! No daughter of mine is American” (74) and she always warns her of any shameful behaviors against her Arab culture, such as dating: “Palestinian women should be virgins when they marry,” she reminds Khadija, “their parents expect this as do most of their potential spouses” (94).

Similarly, Khadija’s father is a source of her confusion. His disappointment, frustration, and sadness for failing to fulfill his dreams in America affect Khadija who describes him as “an angry machine that sees suspicious moves in very breath” (37). He is a weak character who resorts to alcoholism and abusive acts against his daughter to get rid of his frustration towards America which “has taken [his] dreams that used to float like those giant balloons, and filled them with sand” (37). He is like the father of the
young Korean American girl Young Ju in An Na’s *A Step from Heaven* (2002), whose violence against his wife and daughter is related to his depression in America where he can not achieve his goals. Even Khadija’s reaction against her drunken father when he hits her brother is similar to Young Ju’s, in which she dials 911: “I do what I have never done. I run to the phone and dial 911 like they say to do in school” (207). This reaction does not mean that she has negotiated with her parent, though – in fact, even though she was trying to protect herself, she worries about the results: “scary is what is going to happen to us until Ma comes home. Scary is what Ma will do and if they’ll say it’s my fault” (208).

Khadija’s description of her father’s changing moods and his drinking reveals her inability to see him as a model father: “Sometimes, though, he is an angry machine that sees suspicious moves in every breath. But most of the time he is sad, his thoughts somewhere I cannot visit” (37). Thus, the gap between Khadija and her father is based on his feeling of failure and of Khadija’s feeling of not having a typical father. She does not try to negotiate with him because of her desperate feeling of the fruitlessness of doing so. Moreover, his drinking scares Khadija: “When he drinks...his eyes become bullets, his fists the curled hands of a boxer, and our living room the ring of *Monday Night Wrestling*” (38). Khadija recognizes her father’s problem which is related to his loss of Arab identity, homeland and culture, and his inability to assimilate into American culture: “‘My ache comes from losing my home,’ my father tells us a lot. She has a conflict between understanding his problem and blaming him for failing to integrate into American culture and the people around him. After witnessing how her uncles and her cousins are able to make successful lives for themselves in America, Khadija makes the
difficult decision to avoid contact with him as much as possible: “Part of me understands that, because I see him unhappy and feeling different than everyone else here, but part of me doesn’t understand. I see my uncles and cousins and neighbors, and they seem to be doing just fine. So mostly I try to stay out of his way” (39).

Adding to Khadija’s sense that home is a place where she is misunderstood is the fact that her mother wants her to identify with Palestinians, not with Americans: “‘You are Palestinian,’ she says in Arabic...You are Palestinian and you should be proud of that” (74). Khadija refuses her mother’s identity label “Palestinian” because she feels that she is an American; she replies her mother in English which reveals the generational gap between her and her mother in terms of the use of language, in which the older generation tends to use the native language, while the younger generation uses the language of the host culture because of the weak attachment with the native culture: “‘You are Palestinian,’ I tell her in English. ‘I am American.’ ‘Ma, I can’t speak Arabic right, I’ve never even been there, and I don’t like all of those dancing parties. I like stories and movies. I can be American and still be your daughter’” (74). She tries to convince her mother that she can be identified as an American and follow her mother’s rules. Khadija’s mother’s reaction clearly shows the generation gap between the older and younger generations, as she refuses to identify her daughter with Americans, complains to her husband that it is shameful that Khadija cannot speak Arabic: “‘No! No daughter of mine is American.’ We have this fight all the time. She is always telling Baba how shameful it is that I don’t speak my language, that I don’t mind her, and that I walk like a boy” (74).
Khadija friendship with a Jewish boy called Michael is a reaction toward her failure to negotiate with her parents and reflects that she tries not to be influenced by her parents’ religious and political ideologies, especially the idea that Jewish persons are the as enemies of Arabs. As Khadija reflects, “I have a friend at school, but I don’t tell my parents about him. His name is Michael and he’s Jewish, but the real problem is that he’s a boy and I’m not supposed to be friends with boys” (75). In other words, Khadija chooses not to perpetuate her parents’ sense of conflict with Israelis.

Khadija’s conflicts with her parents spill over into her female friendships, as well. For instance, she is ashamed to invite her friend Patsy to have dinner at her house because of her mother’s inability to speak English and of her father’s displays of temper. She internally mocks her mother who tells her that it is shameful not to invite her friend for dinner after knowing her for three weeks: “‘You shamed?’ she asked me in English, which made me feel pretty bad because it’s sort of true. It’s not that I’m ashamed, but there are things that an American wouldn’t understand, like my mother’s language or my father’s yelling” (114). Thus, Khadija’s hesitation to invite her friend to her house represents a reaction toward her failure of building a successful negotiation with her mother who is not assimilated into the American way of life and who does not understand Khadija’s need to fit in with her peers.

In another traumatic moment of misunderstanding, Khadija’s mother walks in on Khadija and her friend as they are looking at a Playboy magazine. As Khadija recounts, “For some reason this picture [of a naked woman] fascinated me, which is why I didn’t notice when Ma came in the room. Suddenly she was in front of me. ‘What is that?’ Before I could answer, she grabbed it, and after a couple of seconds she
screamed curses like I have never heard, and half of which I could not understand. She looked at Jennifer and screamed in Arabic for her to leave, Jennifer ran out, grabbing her shoes, but not stopping to put them on. Ma slapped my face, cursed me, cursed America, cursed my father, and cursed God. She burned the magazines and then dinner” (152).

Khadija’s mother rage is due to her refusal to allow her daughter’s sexual exploration along lines that might be less unacceptable for the parents of American teenagers.

Khadija blames the role of the culture of honor in making her negotiation with her mother unsuccessful regarding her sexuality. Her mother is scared about her daughters’ relationship with American boys and having sex with them:

Ma always used to tell my two half sisters about boys, especially American boys, and how they will take that secret thing between your legs for nothing. “No committer.” That’s why Mina and Mona were married so young. I think it’s also because their father, my mother’s first husband, was dead, and Baba wanted to get rid of the problem of unmarried girls in his house. “Your husband has to be the one to take it from you,” Ma told me once. “Otherwise you are a disgrace to us and we are stuck with you forever.” (178, 179)

Furthermore, Khadija’s friendship with Patricia reflects her identity conflict as an Arab girl who tries to follow her family’s traditions, and as an American girl who loves to be with her American friends. However, her parents’ refusal to make her join her American friends’ social activities depicts how she is torn between the American and the Arab worlds and how she cannot negotiate this matter. She says about Patricia’s invitation to attend a party: “I didn’t argue. I knew that was what [my mother] was going
to say. And even if she said yes, Baba would probably have hit me just for asking” (173). Thus, Khadija does not try to negotiate with her mother about Patricia’s invitation because of her previous knowledge of the uselessness of this discussion.

Halaby leaves Khadija as a character who remains in-between cultures and suffers from her feeling of being displaced and lost: “It is time to start something new, and something old, not to fix something unfinished. I will watch just the right way, to see the underside of things, the thinking things, and the forgetting things” (204). In the end, Khadija accepts her situation without negotiating strongly with her parents. Like Soraya, in order to act in her world, she realizes that she might have to deny the Arab part of her identity.

Similarly, Soraya feels lost in America, but she approaches her situation a bit differently than does Khadija. Sarkar describes her as “a spirited young woman hopelessly entwined in memories of her secret sexual liaison with her uncle Haydar, who himself is persecuted by memories of having killed his father's assassins in Nawara. Soraya prides herself on being different from her mother Maysoun and her sisters' Palestinian value systems; however, her feelings of being ‘in-between’ make her look for succor in the stories of her father's Palestinian employee Sameer and her aunt Dahlia” (265).

Soraya is a girl full of pride and of confidence. She opposes her family and her mother both of whom view her as a burden to them until they can marry her off. As Soraya puts it, “my mother is disappointed that I am not a good daughter, but she won’t admit that she has anything to do with it and says instead that I have a weak spirit and have been ‘taken in by the lie that America is: freedom, freedom, freedom’” (24-25). In
order to stir things up, Soraya accentuates her American behavior, even when she goes back to Nawara. For instance, she dances in front of a barred window, challenging all the restrictions imposed on her by her traditions and Arab culture:

It was only a room in my grandmother’s house in boring little Nawara, but hiz hiz hiz the way my feet taught my hips to follow the drumbeats. I imagined I was an imprisoned princess and the man who watched me from behind his gun was my evil captor. I would dance every night, waiting for the heroic prince who would rescue me and love me until the drumbeats stopped, which would be never (28).

Soraya also faces criticism from her American classmates who hold the negative stereotypes about Arabs that are perpetuated in the media: “‘She’s Arabian,’ they say at my high school as I pass by them. ‘In her country they don’t have furniture or dishwashers, only oil’” (24). Soraya does not try to negotiate with her classmates because she wants to live an American life: “I tell them what they want to hear, which is nasty stories about young men sticking their things into goats and some twelve-year-old girl being carried off on a camel to be third wife to old Shaykh So-and-So and the five oil wells my father owns” (24). Of course, Soraya’s answer also reflects her sarcastic nature – it seems to her that no matter what she said, she could not change their viewpoints about Arabs and that may be another reason why she retells them the stereotypes that they have about Arabs.

When Soraya’s mother learns that she has been telling lies about her Arab culture to her American classmates, she wants her to defend her culture: “‘My mother exploded the first time she heard about a story I told. ‘You have to show the best of us, not the ugly lies’” (24). Sorays leaves the responsibility of defending her culture to her sister and
cousin and wants to live on her own terms: “But I let my ambassador sister and cousins do that while I talk ghetto slang” (24).

Most importantly, when Soraya thinks about the future that her mother wants her to live, she becomes depressed: “I know she can’t wait until next year is over and I’m done with high school so she can marry me off and concentrate on the things that matter to her, like her house and her hair” (25). Soraya is unable to negotiate with her mother over Arab traditions because she does not want to be restricted by the power of those traditions; she wants to live her life without any limitations. In her description of her cousins, Soraya reflects anxieties, terming her cousin Khadija “conservative” (25) because she accepts the authority of her parents; she says that Khadija “she acts stupid like she can’t think for herself” (25). She also mocks her cousin Mawal: “Mawal, who lives in Nawara, would be my mother’s version of perfect if she weren’t so fat, like my mother” (25). She criticizes her cousin Hala as a boring girl because she reads a lot: “My cousin Hala, who didn’t grow up here and lives in Arizona now, is my mother’s favorite because she is ‘such a good Arab girl,’ but I say she is boring with a capital B and even my mother agrees that she should get her nose out of books more often” (25).

Ultimately, her choice to date a man secretly reflects her refusal of her family’s traditions, her desire to live a liberal life, and of her reaction toward her inability to negotiate with her mother. She wants to explore the meaning of love and find her match: “This year I told my family a thousand and one lies and went to a disco and danced for a beautiful man who came to love me, love me so much that I carried his credit card, wore his jewelry, and had lunch with him until I satisfied him in every way. Then he returned to his blond American wife and two blond American children while I folded myself into
the boxes that once bulged with sparkling promises, waiting for the ache to leave, which it did eventually. Dance, shake it all out—hiz hiz hiz—with eyes closed and hips racing those awful drums” (28, 29). Thus, Soraya’s dancing represents a physical manifestation of her internal struggles.

In addition to reflecting upon her own oppression, Soraya is horrified when her uncle slaps her cousin Khadija at a family wedding reception:

I felt a knife go through me...Suddenly the humiliation that Khadija had on her face drenched me. I felt dirty, as if I was walking naked and people were throwing mud at me...He’s an asshole...I wanted to shout something at her [Soraya’s mother], but I didn’t have the energy...feeling as though someone had poured acid into my belly...I sat at the table for the rest of the evening, numb and burning first with anger then with an awful kind of dirty embarrassment. I hated my uncle more in that moment than I have ever hated anyone. I couldn’t think up words ugly enough to describe him. I hated my mother for blaming me. (34, 35)

Finally, in her refusal for the marriage offer by Riad, a man of whom her parents approve, Soraya reveals her sense of having a bi-furcated identity: “And I turn to steel the soft part inside of me that wants to crumble with rage and sadness. I’m so sick of everything between haram or halal, but nothing in between. I am in between. So I drive home with the windows down and the stereo blasting, and even though I can’t close my eyes, in my mind I am dancing the rage away” (117). Thus, Soraya here reflects her confused state when she uses the first pronoun “I” in italics, but she insists to live according to her American way of life to get rid of this sense of confusion. She escapes
her in-between world by returning to dance and music, saying “music loud, loud, loud, to
drown it all and make my escape plan” (191).

Unlike Mawal, Khadija, and Soraya, Hala, who has finished her high school
education in Arizona and intends to go to university, is the only character who is shown
to hold on to her Arab identity and harmonize it successfully with her US identity.
Halaby uses the other cousins’ experiences as a point of comparison, allowing the reader
to speculate on how Hala’s behavior and situation end up leading her into a better
emotional place.

Hala’s situation is not ideal – she feels at odds with her older sister and father
because they hold on to the traditional way of life in the West Bank, whereas she has
come to adopt many American ways of viewing the world. On a journey to Jordan in
order to visit with her family, Hala views her time there as “an attempt to make peace
with memories of childhood, and to sever all connections with her roots before starting
college and a new life in the US...her trip brings back memories of her dead mother, of
growing up in Jordan under her sister Latifa’s care, of her father’s reluctance to let her
study in America, and of her own rebellion against patriarchal authority” (Sarkar 264).

In one of the most interesting scenes in the novel, Hala changes her clothes on the
plane when she travels to Jordan by wearing an ankle-length Middle Eastern-style dress
instead of wearing a typical American T-shirt and blue jeans:

My gray, ankle-length dress scratches me everywhere, no matter how I shift in my
regular class, no frills seat. It tickles my bottom and has a scooped back and
scooped front, so people can peek from all angles. I thought the dress would give
me confidence – mostly covering me, but pretty – but instead I fold myself,
hunch, and calculate whether a tiny airplane bathroom is big enough to hold me as I change my clothes. (5)

Thus, Hala’s trip to Jordan starts with her feelings of alienation and discomfort, set of feelings that mirror her own mother’s sense of displacement years earlier when she left her homeland Palestine to live in Jordan. As Hala remembers it, “even though my mother had lived in Jordan since she was nineteen, she was Palestinian and saw my father as something of a foreigner. In distance she was not so far from the home in which she grew up, but in reality, she was in another country—another household—with an entirely different way of thinking” (9).

Additionally, Hala’s mother stood against her husband’s rigidity regarding Hala’s wish to travel to America. Even though she is relatively young, Hala realizes that her trip to America has significance for her mother:

My mother was excited, perhaps because she thought I’d have a chance to finish what she barely started, or perhaps she thought I’d have a freer education. Regardless, I was terrified at the thought of being away from my family, even though the idea of going to America—the America my mother had only tasted—was exciting. I was so tired of being made fun of for reading, for being too headstrong, for speaking my mind. (9)

Hala’s description of her mother’s village in Palestine, Nawara, reveals her yearning to connect to her mother’s origin and traditions. As Hala observes, “Her village, Nawara, is known for lovely, cleverly embroidered dresses (rozas) in an area of villages where almost no one embroiders, for lack of time and money. My mother was competent in embroidery, but she was not typical—even in her already nontypical village—and her
interests lay elsewhere” (9, 10). The description of embroidery and rozas represent a linkage between these alienated women and their origin and home. It also reflects a yearning for the customs and traditions that connect Hala’s mother with her homeland and her village.

Nonetheless, Hala depicts her mother’s late teenage years as difficult ones in which she becomes a victim of traditions and of the culture of honor that oblige her to sacrifice her future for the sake of her father’s honor and to return to Nawara after gossip about her relationship with a boyfriend. Thus, although Hala’s father treats her mother kindly, she keeps feeling that she is dislocated and alienated: “My father was indulgent with my mother. He even offered to let her continue her studies, in Jordan. She refused—perhaps she was still heartsick—and began her role as wife and mother” (10, 11). Because of her own suffering and sense of dislocation, Hala’s mother insists on letting Hala go to America to live her free life and to get rid of the restrictions of traditions: “If Hala stays here she will rot like me and like Latifa. Look at us. We have rotted. Let Hala grow and dream” (9).

Early in her visit to Jordan, Hala starts to feel that she is alienated from the people around her, who look at her as an outsider:

I know they see me with curious eyes. I left before marrying age. I have finished high school and I should be coming back for marriage, not for death. I should have longer hair. I should wear makeup. I should not wear blue jeans and extremely unfeminine dresses, as Aunt Suha says. I should stop using English words. Nila, one of my classmates at the American school just married and is already pregnant. I am unconnected. (77)
When her father demands that she give up her plans to go back to the US and pursue higher education, Hala panics. She does not want to experience her mother’s suffering and aspires to achieve and to complement her mother’s ambition to live a freer life in the US:

A screen lifted from my eyes. I was to replace my mother with a husband. I was to replace my mother with a husband. I was to stay in Jordan forever. Marry—engaged even before high school was over. Have children. Be someone else’s burden. Maybe I spoke because I had learned how to move my tongue like an American… “I am going back with Hamdi and Fay”… “My mother’s wish was that I study in America. If I stay here, I will kill myself. I will go to my mother and then you will have the blood of two people on your hands.” (45)

Most importantly, Hala refuses the idea of marriage as the only dream awaiting Arab girls and prefers to be free without the bond of marriage:

Surely this is not what my father has in mind for me. Marriage, marriage, marriage. This is not what I want from life. I’ve seen what happens when very young girls marry men they don’t know I am not ready to marry at all. I know this. And if I stay here, I might come to feel differently. And then I will be like my mother. The woman of Unfulfilled Dreams…But my father must know by now that he will lose me forever if he pushes too hard. I am not willing to stay and take that chance. I realize that now…and so while I remain unconnected, like a charm without a chain to hang from, I am happy. (83)

Although she does not wish to end up unfilled, Hala also tries to reconnect with the world she has come to associate with her father; she starts to practice speaking
Arabic; she enjoys the coffee that her sister Latifa prepares; she appreciates the aesthetic aspects of their home. Indeed, it is when Hala watches her brother Jalal’s wedding video that she reaches a turning point in her attitude regarding her bifurcated identity. She gains a sense of joy from describing the wedding traditions in Nawara, in which all the people come to the wedding party sharing the bride’s and bridegroom’s happiness, but she also feels a connection with her cousin Soraya, who dances freely at the wedding in an American style. For Hala, Soraya represents one side of her identity, and the bride Jawahir and the other women represent the other. The clash between these two types of dances or traditions is clear from Latifa’s criticism of Soraya’s dance: “Look at Soraya. Can you believe she dances like that with no shame?” (82) she asks Hala. On the contrary, Hala sympathizes with Soraya and does not find anything wrong in her dance. She tells Latifa, “I think it’s because she does the things people are scared of. She makes me sad, and whenever I see her, I feel as though something bad is going to happen to her…She is a beautiful dancer” (82).

Next, Hala turns her attention to the bride: “I look back at Jawahir, who is once again sitting on her throne, staring off into space. Surely this is not what my father has in mind for me. Marriage, marriage, marriage. This is not what I want from my life. I’ve seen what happens when very young girls marry men they don’t know” (82). Instead of listening to her sister and father, Hala is influenced by her Aunt Fay who advises her to stand her ground, telling Hala: “Don’t do anything you don’t want to” (83). Thus, she stands up to her father and asks him to empathize with her situation.

Ultimately, after realizing that he needs to meet his daughter halfway, Hala’s father approves of her decision to return to the US. He tells her:
I think maybe you should wait to get married. I think you should go back to Hamdi and his Red, White, and Blue Wife and finish your schooling…I am proud of you. It seems you are a very good girl…You have changed since you’ve been gone. I can think of no one here who would be a good match for you now. Maybe in several years, or maybe not. Maybe you are better suited to marry someone who isn’t Arab. I don’t know. I think you should finish—or at least start—the university before you get married. (196, 197)

Unlike her cousins, who are unable to close the identity gaps with their parents, Hala, by first attempting to understand her father’s home, but then standing her ground, is able to negotiate a compromise. As she tells herself: “I am starting over, starting over. My mother is always with me. My father has not abandoned me…. It is time to start something new, and something old, not to fix something unfinished. I will watch the right way, to see the underside of things, the thinking things and the forgetting things, as my mother used to say” (204).

On her return flight to the US, Hala wears the traditional roza as an attempt to reflect her connection with her homeland and with her mother, even though her father advises her to wear the American dress: “My father argued with me the whole time I was getting dressed to leave… ‘why can’t you wear your beloved jeans like you do all the time?’… I am wearing a roza that my grandmother made for my mother as part of her trousseau” (203). Hala even puts a gold charm of Palestine on her necklace as a symbol of her belonging to her mother’s homeland. In a counterpoint to her arrival to Amman, Hala feels comfortable on the plane: “I am not at all nervous on this flight. There is no
mystery and no worrying. No one is expecting a face I cannot offer. No, this flight is quiet... I am starting over, starting over” (204).

As *West of the Jordan* concludes, Hala’s recounting of her mother’s advice about identity could serve as an emblem for all of those young women in both Shakir and Halaby’s texts who are able to negotiate a self-actualized identity by successfully joining the old with the new:

Remember for yourself and for your tomorrow, my mother used to say. Remember to make your day new and old, but be sure to think of something you never thought of before. If you don’t, your life will be like having your foot stuck in a mouse hole, looks small and harmless, but holds on tight and won’t let you go until something comes along to change the landscape. (218)
CHAPTER FIVE
NEGOTIATION AND SELF-ACTUALIZATION IN ALICIA ERIAN’S TOWELHEAD

The pattern of negotiation and self-actualization I have established in chapter four plays out somewhat differently in Towelhead, a text not originally written for teenagers, but one that has been marketed to them, both as a novel and as a major Hollywood motion picture. The text is listed in mainstream review publications and in young adult literature “best of” lists, and as such, it can be classified as a crossover novel. Alicia Erian, the Egyptian-American writer of Towelhead, creates a believable young protagonist, Jasira, who must first come to understand the reality of her situation and give voice to it before she can negotiate an integrated identity. From the beginning of her story, Jasira finds it difficult to negotiate with her mother and father, who are either ignorant of her needs or who willfully ignore their duties as parental guides. Additionally, Jasira’s Lebanese “roots only deepen her miserable isolation by making her the target of her classmates’ epithets on the eve of the Gulf War” (Williams 60).

In this chapter, I consider how Jasira attempts to negotiate with the power structure around her in order to develop a stable identity. Towelhead is different from Remember Me to Lebanon and West of the Jordan in that it focuses on Jasira’s struggle to build her identity solely through her sexuality. The protagonist does not suffer from bicultural identity crisis like the characters I discussed previously because she has never been encouraged to embrace any aspects of her Arab cultural background. She does not know about Lebanon and about the traditions there, and the traditions she learns are from her father, who often treats her as if she should already know them. Additionally, as the
text is focalized through thirteen year-old Jasira as narrator, we learn everything about her from her narration.

At the beginning of the novel, Jasira’s mother, who is an Irish American, sends her from New York to Houston to live with her Lebanese father, a distant and socially awkward engineer. Jasira’s mother views her daughter as competition for the affections of her boyfriend, Barry. While her mother’s suspicions are correct, insofar as Barry has engaged in inappropriate behavior with Jasira, she chooses to remain in her relationship and send Jasira away. Indeed, although Jasira has not sought out Barry’s attentions, she comes to associate her bourgeoning sexuality with power – she realizes that she has been able to change the way adults behave, simply by complying with Barry’s sexual advances. This realization marks the first time of many that Jasira is used by adults for their own ends, but is unable to advocate for herself. In other words, Jasira is far from being self-actualized.

Obviously, Jasira is afraid and hurt by her rigid father, who practices his authoritarian power over her, giving her important information on her body development or information that would enable her to reach sexual maturity in a safe way. Because of her need for love, attention, and acceptance, Jasira seeks these things in sexual relationships with her African American boyfriend Thomas whom the family rejects and with the Army reservist next door neighbor, Mr. Vuoso, whose son she babysits.

Jasira’s father, a NASA engineer, practices an abusive and violent method of parenting Jasira. Her father forbids Jasira’s friendship with the African American boy Thomas because he wants to protect her honor from being sullied and because he holds racist attitudes. When her father discovers that Jasira reads the *Playboy* magazines
offered to her by Mr. Vuoso, he resorts to violence, so she escapes to her neighbors Melina and Gil, a loving and stable couple, who help her. By the end of the novel, Jasira’s parents have come to understand that their way of dealing with Jasira has contributed to her lack of self-actualization.

Erian’s text follows the model of many young adult narratives in that the story, as mentioned earlier, is focalized entirely through Jasira. As Giles has noted, Towelhead is “a novel narrated by a character who doesn’t understand the implications of her own story” (14). The choice to follow this narrative pattern may have been based upon the idea that young readers would identify with Jasira’s confusion if it were expressed through a thirteen year-old’s consciousness. Jasira’s decision to engage in sex with Mr. Vuoso, whom she believes loves her, reflects her inability to understand that she is being used. Additionally, Jasira’s naïveté is related to her desire to compensate for the love and acceptance she misses from her parents. Thus, Jasira’s naïveté is a technique used by the author to make her text realistic in reflecting young adults’ nature and personalities which are not always stable. She wants this work to reach those young adult readers who have the same problems as the protagonist – who may be taken advantage of by adults. And in the time honored tradition of contemporary YA literature, most adult figures are shown to be unreliable. As Giles claims, “Towelhead nicely captures the rush of sexual stimuli that, especially when coupled with a lack of hard facts, turns an awakening into a fever dream. What the novel really nails, though, is grown-ups: their delusions, their pettiness, the way they sometimes seem, as a class, uniquely unqualified to raise children” (14).

Additionally, unlike the authors of traditional, mainstream narratives, Erian employs a didacticism at various places in the novel that appears to provide hints to a
young audience about how to behave. Erian appears to view her novel as a teaching tool to orient the reader and their parents about the problems of young adults and the risks of ignoring the maturity and development of their emotional and sexual needs. For instance, midway through the narrative, Erian depicts Jasira reading a self-help book, given to her by Melina, the only seemingly appropriate parental presence in the text. The technique of embedding a narrative in this instance would seem to be Erian’s attempt to provide guidance for young readers, much in the same way that Judy Blume included articles on abstinence and family planning in her well-known YA novel about sexual awakening, *Forever* (1976).

Unlike the self-actualized protagonists featured in *Remember Me to Lebanon* and *West of the Jordan*, Jasira has to negotiate with her father, who adheres to his Lebanese traditions, but who does not take the time to explain them to Jasira. In other words, when she moves in with her father, Jasira must conform to traditions she does not entirely understand. Moreover, her only childhood memories of her father involve violence. From the beginning, Jasira hints at the impossibility of establishing a successful negotiation with her father: “I didn’t want to live with Daddy. He had a weird accent and came from Lebanon...I had a memory of Daddy slapping my mother, and then of my mother taking off his glasses and grinding them into the floor with her shoe. I don’t know what they were fighting about, but I was glad that he couldn’t see anymore” (1).

Jasira’s parents’ violent relationship and separation negatively influence her dialogue with them and make her lose her sense of belonging to them. This is clear from her depression and tension that results from visiting her father prior to moving in with him full-time: “[As a child,] I still had to visit him for a month every summer, and I got
depressed about that... It was just too tense, being with Daddy. He wanted everything
done in a certain way that only he knew about... Once I spilled some juice on one of his
foreign rugs, and he told me that I would never find a husband” (1). The connection
between being clumsy and not being attractive sinks in and impacts Jasira’s ability to
love or to trust her father.

The gloomy description of Jasira’s meeting with her father when she arrives in
Texas reveals her depression, disappointment, and fear. He refuses to hug her at the
airport because this is untraditional for him. When Jasira asks him if he is going to hug
her, he says “‘This is how we do it in my country.’ Then he started walking really fast
through the airport, so I could barely keep up... He didn’t look at me or talk to me. We
both just watched for my suitcase... When I slowed down, though, Daddy ended up
getting too far ahead of me” (2).

The disconnect between Jasira’s father’s view of sexuality and the view that
predominates in US culture is underscored from the beginning of the novel. On her ride
home from the airport, Jasira is embarrassed to look at the billboards which depict
advertisements featuring semi-naked women: “I tried not to notice all the billboards for
gentlemen’s clubs along the way. It was embarrassing, those women with their breasts
hanging out... Daddy didn’t say anything about the billboards, which made them even
more embarrassing. I started to feel like they were all my fault. Like anything awful and
dirty was my fault. My mother hadn’t told Daddy about Barry and me, but she had told
him that she thought I was growing up too fast, and would probably benefit from a
stricter upbringing” (3). Thus, Jasira’s mother handling of her sexuality compels Jasira to
develop a skewed view of her own sexuality and of her own culpability in the sexual advances put forth by Barry.

Even Jasira’s sexuality and freedom to wear the clothes she wants cannot be negotiated because of her father’s traditions and rigidity. For instance, he reacts violently because of what she wears on her second morning in Houston: “I went to the breakfast table in my T-shirt and underwear, and he slapped me and told me to go put on proper clothes” (3). This incident greatly influences Jasira’s sense of self because it reflects her father’s traditionally rigid borderlines and his suppression of her sexuality: “It was the first time anyone had ever slapped me, and I started to cry. ‘Why did you do that?’ I asked him, and he said things were going to be different from now...I got back into bed and cried some more. I wanted to go home, and it was only the second day” (3). Thus, from this incident on, Jasira becomes hesitant to attempt to negotiate with her father because of her recognition of his violent and oppressive way of dealing with her subjectivity. Based upon both of her parents’ reactions to her sexuality, Jasira becomes a prime candidate for the advances of her next door neighbor.

Jasira’s parents’ incompetent dealing with her sexual maturity when she has her period reveals how there is a lack of common ground and negotiation between them. Jasira’s fear of telling her father about her period reveals how she is sexually suppressed by him and how careless he is about her need of his help. When she tells him her situation, he replies to her, “’Your period?...You’re too young to get your period...My God...You can’t wear tampons until you’re married. Do you understand what I’m telling you?’” (14, 15). Here it should be noted that Jasira’s father’s mind is occupied with her suitability as a future bride; he is influenced by keeping her virginity up to the moment of
marriage because of the culture of honor which considers losing virginity as a shameful issue for girls and parents. That said, in the drugstore later that day, her father keeps interfering in her privacy by choosing her maxi-pads, which highly confuses her – one minute he does not wish to speak of her situation and in another minute he becomes very involved. Similarly, Jasira’s mother’s carelessness in helping Jasira by giving her advice about how to deal with her period reflects how selfish she is. Instead of supporting Jasira emotionally, she asks her to tell her dad about it.

Jasira’s father’s reaction later in the text when he discovers that she uses tampons is indicative of his unwillingness to negotiate with her. Not only does he kick her out of the house, he tells her mother that Jasira “has run away,” a reflection of his sense that using tampons is a shameful act, one that cannot even be spoken of to his ex-wife. The impact of this behavior on Jasira is clear, as she is shown to think: “On the walk home, I fantasized that something terrible would happen to me. That my body would be found after a long search and that my parents would feel awful about it for the rest of their lives” (22).

Jasira’s father’s interference in her choice of underwear and in her privacy reflects his oppressive personality, his adherence to the culture of honor, and his inability to establish a successful negotiation that will lead Jasira to understand her sexuality. For example, he asks her to put on her bra to show him if it fits, Jasira complains about his interference:

...shopping for clothes with Daddy sounded as bad as shopping for maxi-pads...When I opened the door to my dressing room, though, it was Daddy standing there...I really couldn’t stand the sight of Daddy in the mirror, looking at
me...I didn’t understand why he wanted to know so much about my body if he
didn’t even like it. I thought he should keep away from it instead. I thought only
people who really and truly liked it should get to see it. (36, 37)

Later, when Jasira shows her father her bra without wearing a shirt guessing that he wants
to see it without a shirt, he slaps her on her face because it is a shameful act in his culture:
“He nodded. ‘Try to remember that we never leave our rooms unless we’re properly
dressed’” (38). This action reflects his inability to negotiate with Jasira about her wearing
of clothes: he slaps her first, and then he justifies his behavior to her.

Jasira’s depiction of her father’s double standards in his relationship with his
girlfriend Thena reveals the contradictory features of his personality and his duality in
negotiating with his daughter and his girlfriend. He suppresses his daughter’s sexuality
while engaging in extra-marital relations with his girlfriend; he tells his girlfriend funny
stories about his job in NASA and behaves harshly with his daughter. Thus, it seems
clear that Jasira does not see her father as caring for her, so she reacts to her inability to
negotiate with him about her sexuality by agreeing to develop a relationship with Mr.
Vuoso, the neighbor with whom her father is in conflict.

Jasira’s father refusal to permit her friendship with the African American teenager
Thomas Bradley represents his adherence to the culture of honor or shame and his
inability of orienting Jasira about building a healthy relationship. Instead of helping her to
work through her feelings about Thomas, he says, “you should try to make friends with a
girl” (76, 77). When Thomas’s mother calls him to convince him to allow Jasira to have
dinner with them, he slaps Jasira and tells her. “When I say no, it means no. It doesn’t
mean tell your friend to have his mom call and try to change my mind...Don’t let it
happen again...And you’re not allowed to go in that boy’s room with him. I already told
his mother...You are restricted to the common areas of their home’” (77, 78). It seems
clear that a friendship with a boy is nonnegotiable for Jasira’s father, but when he allows
her to accept the invitation, he tells Jasira a lot of rules and warnings that reflect his
authoritarian and oppressive personality: “’’You can’t go to someone’s house for dinner in
jeans...don’t sit there looking miserable...Try to smile a little...I don’t want to hear any
more of this shit about how people think you’re an unhappy little girl. Is that
clear?...Practice smiling now’” (78, 79). Thus, Jasira is clearly is oppressed by her father
who does not respect her privacy and who keeps giving her obligations that undermine
her self confidence and make her too fragile to accept any healthy relationship. She
cannot negotiate with him and continuously thinks, “I didn’t understand” (36).

Similarly, Jasira suffers from a lack of negotiation with her mother about her
sexuality and body development. Her mother is careless to teach her how to shave her
pubic hair which greatly influences her psyche and weakens her emotions toward her
mother: “I’d begged my mother to teach me how to shave, but she said no, that once you
started, there was no stopping. I cried about this all the time, and my mother told me to
can it. I told her that the girls in gym class called me Chewbacca, and she said she didn’t
know who that was” (7).

Although Jasira’s mother knows that her father is oppressive and violent, she asks
her to obey him and not to call her to find out information when she gets her period. Her
mother says, “You shouldn’t be calling me...You should be calling your father...Listen
to me, Jasira. You and I both know your father has problems. He overacts. That means
you have to adjust your behavior to take that into account...Do you understand me? I
mean, I just can’t be getting these phone calls all the time. What’s the point of you even living there if I have to fix everything?” (21). Thus, like her father, Jasira’s mother fails to negotiate with Jasira because of her carelessness about Jasira’s sexual maturity.

Jasira’s mother’s response to the fact that her boyfriend Barry stares at Jasira’s chest reflects an immaturity that is at the root of her problems as a parent. She tells her daughter: “No one wants to hear about your breasts, Jasira. Do you understand me? They don’t want to hear about your breasts… and they don’t want to hear about your period, okay? You need to keep all of that stuff to yourself. Then maybe you and I will have something to talk about” (40). This is a reflection of the wide gap between Jasira and her mother who fails to guide her and understand her problem.

Jasira tries to negotiate with her mother about her relationship with Thomas Bradley, but her mother refuses to provide her with advice beyond simply forbidding her to have a boyfriend: “’You’re too young to have a boyfriend…Remember that’” (76), she says. Like Jasira’s father, her mother refuses this relationship based on her racist attitudes – she fears that Jasira’s involvement with an African American boy will ruin her reputation, even though Jasira clearly likes Thomas. Her mother tells her: “’It’s very important that you listen to your father’s rules about him. Do you understand?…you can’t visit his house anymore, because it will be very difficult for you later on…your father isn’t even black, and people used to call me all kinds of names…Like nigger lover…Do you want people to call you that?’” (88, 89). Thus, Jasira’s mother’s response is based on her fear of racism, not on her recognition of Jasira’s emotional needs.

Jasira’s mother makes Jasira a point of conflict with her father because of her selfishness. The most surprising point in this conflict is when Jasira’s mother tells her
father that Jasira hates him in front of him as an attempt to make him hit Jasira and to force Jasira to live with her: "'But you hate your father...That’s what you told me on the phone...You might as well know that all she did was complain about you when she first moved down here'" (147, 148). Jasira keeps denying that she hates her father: "'I did not...I don’t hate you...I never said that'" (147, 148). Clearly, this incident negatively changes Jasira’s attitude toward her mother, as she thinks that her mother is jealous of her relationship with her father and wants to spoil it:

I didn’t want to talk to my mother. I was mad at her for … lying to Daddy. It was true, I had hated him when I’d first moved to Houston. But I’d only thought it. I’d never said it. And then I’d changed my mind. It wasn’t that I loved Daddy now; I could never imagine loving him, or even liking him very much. It was something different from all of that. What I had learned about Daddy was that it was very hard for him to be nice, so when he was, it would’ve been wrong not to try to appreciate it. I wished my mother would stop acting so jealous. I could understand how she didn’t want me and Barry to like each other, but me and Daddy, too? He was my own father. He was supposed to like me. Most of the time he didn’t. (148)

A self-actualized young woman is one who can achieve her autonomy, freedom, independence, and self-esteem. She is a person who can fulfill her aspirations, realize her potential, build her identity and subjectivity, and understand her sexuality through developing negotiation skills with the power structure around her. However, because she lacks the parental supervision to become self-actualized, Jasira ends up looking beyond her immediate family for help, and since she has low self-esteem and feels lonely, she is easily manipulated by a number of people.
Thomas Bradley, her classmate, manipulates her, but his behavior is not unusual for a young man who is attempting to sort out the best way to treat girls and to engage in a healthy sexual relationship. Thomas is highly interested in Jasira’s sexuality and asks her questions about her body. He certainly wants to have sex with her, but what makes him differ from Mr. Vuoso is that he is a teenage boy who is trying to sort out his own identity and what it means to be a man in a sexual relationship with another teenager. Jasira does not refuse his offer to go to his bedroom when he invites her to dinner in his house, despite her father’s warning. Jasira’s quick response to have a sexual relationship with him reveals her desire to explore her sexuality and practice her power on Thomas. She wants all men to be attracted to her as a compensation for her need of her father and mother’s compassion. She relies on secrecy in her sexual relationship with Thomas because of her fear of her father’s punishment.

Jasira’s previous loss of virginity is an obstacle in her relationship with Thomas, who is curious to know how she loses it. Her hesitation to tell Thomas the truth is due to her desire not to lose the affections of Mr. Vuoso, her neighbor with whom she has had nonconsensual sex because, as she says to herself, “I really wanted to belong to somebody” (190). Moreover, Jasira cares little for her virginity because it is an obstacle in her desire to be free: “Virginity doesn’t make me pure...I’m not anyone’s property...I knew that rape was bad...just like with Mr. Vuoso. But then I didn’t think it could be rape because I liked Mr. Vuoso again” (191). Jasira’s insistence to read about rape in the self-help book her neighbor Melina gives her represents her curiosity to know about and to find an indication that her loss of virginity is not her fault: “It said that rape was any time someone forced you to do a sex act you didn’t want to do. It said that whatever had
happened wasn’t my fault...It said that Mr. Vuoso was an angry man with mixed-up values” (204, 205).

Jasira’s willingness to have sex with Thomas is related to her desire not to lose him; she wants to keep connected with him: “I want to have sex with Thomas. If it also helps him to forgive me [for not being a virgin], then that’s good, not bad” (192). It is noticeable that her sexual relationship with Thomas is a source of joy to her because she finds it more appropriate than her relationship with Mr. Vuoso.

Although Thomas manipulates Jasira at the beginning of their relationship, he seems at the end more conscious of what Jasira needs. He understands her need of love and affection and insists on the necessity of punishing Mr. Vuoso for what he has done to Jasira. Thus, his sexual relationship with Jasira at the end differs in its purpose from the previous ones, as Thomas tells her “It’s more that I don’t want you to do stuff for me. But this is something for you. That’s different” (303). Jasira’s reaction to Thomas reflects her enjoyment of this relationship and her sense of her subjectivity, as when she says to him: “Nobody makes me that excited. You’re the only one. I wanted to make love to people. I wanted them to tell me what to do. I couldn’t imagine those feelings ever going away” (287, 304). This scene is the best evidence that the author wants her readers to leave the experience of reading the novel with understanding that in consensual and appropriate contexts, teenagers should find sex to be enjoyable.

By contrast, Mr. Vuoso manipulates Jasira because of his recognition of her need for affection. He seems very kind with her when his son Zack, whom she babysits, disobeys her orders and goes to his father’s workplace. He acts as her protector, telling her: “Zack and I are going to have a talk tonight about authority. I think you’ll find that
tomorrow will be a better day.’ Then he leaned over and opened my door for me” (10, 11). Thus, Jasira’s fascination with Mr. Vuoso’s kindness is due to her parents’ harsh treatment of her and due to her need to negotiate with someone who acts as if he understand what she needs.

Mr. Vuoso’s awareness of Jasira’s need for the affection she misses from her parents, his understanding of her curiosity regarding her sexuality gives him a clear picture about Jasira’s personality and how to manipulate her. For instance, he firstly blames her for reading his Playboy magazines when she catches Zack looking at them. This is Mr. Vuoso’s attempt to show Jasira that he is a good father; he asks her many questions to keep her staying with him; he insults her father by calling him “a fucking towelhead” (28); he manipulates her through his recognition that their sexual involvement is something that Jasira would want to keep from her father. Indeed, when he recognizes Jasira’s fear of her father, he touches her genital organs and says: “Tell me why you like looking at [Playboy], and I won’t tell your father’… ‘I don’t know why I like looking at them’…He reached a hand out then and put it around my waist. It was the strongest hand I had ever felt…he pulled me between his knees” (29).

As another sign of his manipulation with Jasira, Mr. Vuoso hides Playboy magazines in order to frustrate Jasira. She thinks: “I was disappointed…I couldn’t remember what we had done before looking at magazines, and now that they were gone, I couldn’t imagine what we would ever do again” (33). Her naïvete is clear when she feels worried that Mr. Vuoso might go to the war in Iraq because of her love for him: “I sat down on the couch then, feeling worried. I started to wonder if Mr. Vuoso really could die” (34). She feels disappointed and depressed when Mr. Vuoso does not show her
affection when she comes to talk to him although she expects him to welcome her and pay attention to her, and she starts to feel jealous about him when she thinks that he might be engaged in multiple relationships with other women.

Thus, Jasira reacts by resorting to masturbation as an attempt to get rid of her disappointment and confusion: “At home, I was upset. I didn’t even feel like having an orgasm. I tried to think of a reason to go back to the Vuoso’, and when I couldn’t, I went over there anyway...I didn’t know what to do. I thought about calling him or writing him a letter, but I wasn’t sure what I would say” (34, 36). Here it should be noted that Mr. Vuoso’s choice to ignore Jasira is intentional, as he wants her to be curious and interested in him, especially when he knows her need for love, passion, and care.

When Jasira goes to show Mr. Vuoso her physical appearance with makeup, Mr. Vuoso manipulates her by making her feel that she is sexually mature: “You look different...You look older with that makeup on” (47, 48). At this moment, Jasira feels freer in showing her sexuality to Mr. Vuoso in which she tells him that she misses looking at his magazines: “I miss looking at your magazines...They make me feel good...They make me have orgasms” (48). From this point on, Jasira becomes fully manipulated by Mr. Vuoso who manipulates her need for sex.

Unlike his previous behavior with Jasira when she is first insulted by Zack, Mr. Vuoso rapes Jasira because he knows that she hits Zack because of insulting her with negative stereotypes. His reaction toward Jasira when he comes to her house reflects his meanness, his recognition of her weakness. He says: “What kind of babysitter are you?...Every day there’s some new problem...I want my magazine back...Go and get my magazine” (66). After raping her, Mr. Vuoso manipulates her again, claiming, “I didn’t
mean to do that. I didn’t’” (67). Jasira’s reaction toward Mr. Vuoso’s raping her reflects how she does not understand the meaning of rape and how she is interested in getting pleasure. That is why she does not react against his actions, telling him: “I don’t want you to go”” (67).

Mr. Vuoso’s role in protecting Jasira against her father’s violence is not based on a good intent; he tries to show Jasira that he can take care of and protect her in order to make her trust him and not to reveal the secret that they have had sex. When it appears that Jasira might tell he yells at her in a way that is designed to hurt and to silence her: “Get out of here... I told you never to come over again... You crossed the line... You can stop crying... It isn’t going to work... You act like you’re so young and you don’t know what you’re doing, but you do know. You know exactly what you’re doing... You know what you do to men... I don’t want to be liked by you. There’s something wrong with you”” (214, 215).

Thus, it seems clear that Mr. Vuoso’s reaction is an attempt to make her feel guilty and to push her to accept culpability in their relationship. He tries to convince her that she is mature and responsible for his actions because she “wants it.” Jasira’s naïveté is clear when she blames herself for what she has done and is confused about what she should do in order not to lose him. She views him as a special person because she considers what he has done to her as a special and good thing. In other words, Jasira does not want to feel alone without Mr. Vuoso. She thinks to herself: “He was the person I was closest to—even more than Thomas. He was the one who did things with me that he wasn’t supposed to, since he was a grown-up... You probably had to realize that you were going to be alone” (216).
Furthermore, Jasira also defies Mr. Vuoso when he comes to her house warning her that her friendship with Thomas will ruin her reputation: “What do you think you’re doing with that nigger?...You’re going to ruin your reputation...Do you understand me? If you hang around with that kid, no one will ever want you” (100). Thus, Mr. Vuoso’s attitude toward Thomas reveals that he is racist and wants to impose his authority on Jasira.

It should be noted that Jasira’s father and Mr. Vuoso’s behaviors complicate Jasira’s ability to appreciate her dual identity as an American and as an Arab. Her father makes her feel alienated, since the only cultural markers he emphasizes involving her behavior as a woman are prohibitive; Mr. Vuoso makes her feel ashamed about her Arab identity. Jasira wants to feel that she is completely American in order to avoid racism at school: “I knew that Daddy wasn’t really patriotic. That he just wanted to bother Mr. Vuoso and try to teach him a lesson [by flying a US flag]. But I didn’t care. I was glad we had a flag. For once it seemed like we were normal Americans” (49). Thus, it seems clear that Jasira is influenced by the citizenship crisis for being an Arab American although she considers herself not belonging to Arab Americans.

Ultimately, Erian seems to suggest that it is the women in Jasira’s neighborhood who are best able to help Jasira to negotiate a positive and integrated identity. Denise, a classmate, helps Jasira prove her subjectivity and identity by convincing her to defy her father who refuses Jasira’s relationship with Thomas. This is due to the free life Denise lives with her parents and how she does not suffer from the loss of her parents’ affection. She advises Jasira to approach her father differently. She says: “Just don’t act so afraid of him...Pretend he’s a dog...You know how you’re not supposed to act afraid of dogs
because they can smell fear...It’s the same with your father. If you just ignore him, he’ll leave you alone”” (186). Additionally, Denise seems more enlightened about how to build a healthy relationship with a boyfriend, and this is why she tries to convince Jasira not to have a relationship based on sex with Thomas, especially after they have had an argument. Denise tells her: “‘I just don’t think it’s fair for Thomas to make you trade your virginity for his forgiveness’” (191). In short, the appearance of Denise’s character in Jasira’s life serves a teaching tool; Denise is a good example of how competent parenting leads a young girl to feel self actualized.

Similarly, Thena, a woman of Euro-American descent who dates Jasira’s father, helps Jasira to understand her sense of her subjectivity and physical appearance. She tries to motivate Jasira’s sense of herself when she suggests she become a model after putting makeup on her face. She also interferes between Jasira and her father to bridge the gap between them when he resorts to violence.

However, Jasira’s neighbor Melina is the most influential person in Jasira’s journey to self-actualization. She helps Jasira overcome her problems and orient her to healthy ways to understand her sexuality and identity. She first defends Jasira against Zack’s insulting words when he calls her “towelhead” (52). Melina recognizes that Zack’s words represent his parents’ opinions about Arabs, and she asks him “‘Who taught you that word?...Don’t ever use that word in this house again...What a mouth on that kid’” (52, 55). From this point on, Jasira feels that she can trust Melina and starts to reveal to her about her problems with her father.

Melina’s opinion of Mr. Vuoso is significant. She describes him as a pig because he reads Playboy and she is the only adult character who seems to understand what Mr.
Vuoño wants from Jasira. She keeps an eye on Jasira to protect her from his manipulation. She tells her: “that guy is a pig...He reads Playboy...We got some of his mail on accident yesterday...I threw it out” (57). At the beginning of her relationship with Melina, Jasira seems unhappy that Melina does not want her to look at Playboy; she thinks: “I felt really upset then. Not just because Melina had thrown out a Playboy, but because she seemed to think it was such a bad thing to like. I didn’t want her to think that way. I wanted her to like it as much as I did. I wanted us to think the same way about everything” (57). Thus, Jasira’s first negotiation with Melina is over the negative influence of reading Playboy because of Jasira’s age. The second point of negotiation between them is over Mr. Vuoño whom Melina thinks that he manipulates Jasira. However, Jasira has come to believe that he is the only person who makes her feel happy: “I remembered what Melina had said, that he was a pig, I didn’t think that was true...That someone who could make me feel so nice could also be so terrible. I liked Melina a lot, and I thought she seemed very smart, but I also thought there might be some things she didn’t understand. Mostly, I believed that anything that could give me an orgasm was good. I believed that my body knew best” (62). Thus, Jasira’s desire for Mr. Vuoño is sexual, as well as emotional.

Melina and her husband Gil’s interference in Jasira’s relationship with Mr. Vuoño is a reflection of their protective role. Melina’s rationality in this novel is clearly depicted in her conviction that Mr. Vuoño’s relationship with Jasira is unhealthy and unequal. She blames Mr. Vuoño for creating this relationship. She knows that he manipulates Jasira because of his recognition of her need for compassion and passion: “Mr. Vuoño is a pig...Just so you know. Any man who wants a girl your age to be his friend is a pig. Do
you understand?...If he asks you to be his friend, I want you to come and tell me. Okay?” (117).

The most influential teaching tool Melina uses to orient Jasira about her sexuality and body is her book *Changing Bodies, Changing Lives* which ends up providing guidance to Jasira so that she can understand herself and become self-actualized. Jasira’s reading of this book improves her ability to distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate sexual relations. For instance, when Jasira reads the section about rape in Melina’s book, she remembers her rape by Mr. Vuoso: “When I came to the part about how I had a hymen and how it might hurt when someone broke it, I couldn’t help it. I started to cry” (153). In other words, this book explains to Jasira the meaning of rape which had been unclear to her.

Melina’s book plays an opposite role to Mr. Vuoso’s *Playboy*, as it paves the way for Jasira to understand what she should know about her body and sexuality, whereas *Playboy* makes Jasira feel that she is an object and that her power resides in giving men like Mr. Vuoso what they ask for.

Melina always negotiates with Jasira about the best way to understand her sexuality and not to be manipulated by Mr. Vuoso. For instance, when she sees Jasira going to Mr. Vuoso’s house, she asks questions, like a responsible parent: “Jasira...Mr. Vuoso is a grown man. It’s not appropriate for a grown man to spend time alone in his house with a thirteen year-old girl. Do you understand me?...A grown man who is a pervert and reads *Playboy*...Can’t you just interview him over the phone?...You’re really stressing me out here...If anything ever happened to you, I’d never forgive myself” (167).
Melina and her husband Gil play an important role in protecting Jasira from her father’s aggression, as well. Melina is the only character in this novel who sympathizes with Jasira and who gives her the compassion she needs. The book she gives to Jasira represents a path of enlightenment for Jasira to help her deal with her sexuality in a rational way. It supports Jasira’s enlightenment and self-actualization at the end of the novel. The book motivates her to be brave enough to reveal what happened to her. She thinks: “I wasn’t sure what read in my book anymore. I wasn’t sure what there was left to know about. Then I found a part about kids who had done sexual things that they hadn’t wanted to do, but their bodies had gotten excited anyway, just like mine with Mr. Vuoso. The book said it wasn’t my fault, and that I was human and not a plant, and that that was why it made sense that my body might’ve acted that way” (245).

Melina defies Jasira’s father because of her recognition of Jasira’s suffering under his violence. She warns him that she will call the police to let them know about his hitting Jasira. Melina’s rationality is evident in the way she deals with knowing about Jasira’s reading of Playboy. She excuses Jasira looking at the pictures if she finds it by accident, but she tells her that this magazine for adults and should not be given by an adult to her: “I wouldn’t mind this stuff so much if it wasn’t for the airbrushing...how anyone feels when they look at the pictures—it doesn’t matter. It’s private...But how a kid your age has a magazine like this isn’t private. You see what I’m saying...This is a magazine for adults only...If you found this magazine, that’s one thing. But if an adult gave it to you, that’s different” (257, 258). Here, it should be noted that the author’s use of Melina’s book and Mr. Vuoso’s Playboy represents a conflict between sexual desire and reason, in which Playboy motivates Jasira’s sexual desire without giving her any knowledge about
how to use this power in a healthy manner. Melina’s book focuses on how to employ sexual desire in a rational manner with healthy results.

In the end, it is Melina’s intervention that enables Jasira to admit to herself and to her family and friends that she has been raped. While she is still too close to the situation to recognize fully that Mr. Vuoso has been using her, she is also able to develop a healthier understanding of her sexuality in her relationship with Thomas, in an age-appropriate relationship. Additionally, Jasira is able to reconcile with her parents, and also establish an appropriate family relationship with Melina and Gil. By the end of the novel, she possesses a healthy understanding of herself as an Arab American young woman.

Unlike Khadija and Soraya in West of the Jordan, Jasira is able to move beyond an unsuccessful negotiation with her parents. Unlike Rima and Hala, her successful negotiation is bridged not only by a helpful mother figure, but by an entire community of women. Erian’s text extends those written by Shakir and Halaby in that she advocates for young women to look beyond their immediate families for support in forging self-actualized identities. It is also interesting to consider how Euro-American women end up helping Jasira to become more comfortable with her Arab identity. Erian suggests that some Euro-Americans such as Denise, Thena, and Melina can be of help. In this respect, Erian may be trying to build a bridge with her predominately American audience.

The intervention of Melina in Jasira’s life is Erian’s way to jumpstart a dialogue between Euro-American and Arab Americans by bringing out into the open the problems of discrimination and racism and showing how these are intertwined with issues of sexism or sexual abuse of young girls. Most importantly, Melina recognizes Arab
prohibitions on sexuality, as well as American attitudes regarding sexual development, and she tries to give Jasira an orientation that will enable her to gain a more balanced and culturally-sensitive understanding of her sexuality.

Erian’s treatment of Euro-Americans in this text might lead some readers to wonder if she wants to claim a superiority or a normativity for Euro-Americans over Arab Americans. However, there are both negatively and positively portrayed characters of every ethnic background in the novel. Erian certainly expects that many of her readers will be non-Arabs, and she wants to draw them in, and introduce them to Euro-American characters who are not racist. For instance, the fact that Gil, Melina’s husband, has lived in Yemen and has a sophisticated understanding of Arab culture is emphasized.

In the end, Melina teaches Jasira to negotiate a healthy Arab American identity by listening to her, being sensitive to her culture, and understanding Jasira’s true nature and conflicts. Melina makes herself available to Jasira by giving her the key to her house, and, ultimately, becoming her legal guardian. The key is symbolic in the novel because it represents the safety of home and adult protection.


Alghorani, Mohammad Adnan. “Identity, Acculturation, and Adjustment of High School Muslim Students in Islamic Schools in the U.S.A.” Diss. The University of Texas at Austin, 2003. Print.


Benitto, Mohamed. “Gender and Intergroup Contact: The Case of Arab Woman.”


Wingfield, Marvin, and Bushra Karaman. “Arab Stereotypes and American Educators.”


