

Identity and Representational Dilemmas: Attempts to De-Orientalize the Arab

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Since its release in 1978, Edward Said's *Orientalism* has been a foundational text in postcolonial studies and many other fields. Much of the text elaborately traces the beginning of the Western stereotyping of the East and how the negative images of Arabs in particular have been sustained through literature, films, and media. Before any discussion of the post-9/11 stereotyping of Arabs, it is important to note that the American tradition of Orientalism, as explained by Said, is different to that of the British and the French. The American experience

in Eastern countries has been described as much less direct and thus based on abstractions. On the other hand, the British and the French enjoyed long cultural encounters with many countries in the East during the colonial period. Douglas Little demonstrates that “in 1776 what the average American knew about the Middle East and its peoples likely came from two sources: the King James Bible and Scheherazade’s *Thousand and One Arabian Nights*” (2008, 11). American Orientalism is also often politicized due to the presence of Israel in the Middle East and Americans associate Orientalism with the imported images from the long-standing conflict between Arabs and Israel. In the last few decades, the American version of Orientalism has been emphasized and disseminated through Hollywood films such as *Jewel of the Nile* (1985), *Three Kings*(1993), *Fahrenheit 9/11*(2004), *Sleeper Cell*(2005). The war on Afghanistan, the invasion of Iraq, and the rise of ISIS also produced new images that disrupted the old archive.

In the pre-9/11 era, Arab Americans were almost invisible in American culture and media. Due to their wide diversity, they resisted fitting well with a particular categorization that can define their racial/ethnic identity. Nadine Naber argues that “the US’s racializing system, which is reinforced by the US media, has racialized Arab Americans according to a unique and contradictory process, resulting in their white but not quite racial/ethnic status” (2000, 56). Additionally, Naber contends

that before 9/11 Arab Americans were not racially victimized to the same degree as other communities that had a history of racial oppression within the United States by the United States government. Nonetheless, what Naber addresses in her article is the situation of Arab Americans in 2000 and before. The 9/11 attacks brought Arab Americans to a position that they could not have imagined. It marked the beginning of a new era that brought about unbearable changes and resulted in some Arab Americans becoming the victims of a popular backlash. As Steven Salaita observes, following the attacks “Arabs and Muslims became major targets of racial profiling, ethnic discrimination, and human rights violations” (2005, 152). The events of 9/11 put so-called multiculturalism and the celebrated melting pot of America to a real test. They also created a dichotomy between the ‘good’ Arab and the ‘bad’ Arab in popular culture. In an attempt to conform to the idea of a good Arab, some Arab Americans even changed their names and tried to show greater degrees of cultural assimilation, a process of moral racialization explored by Georgiana Banita as “the articulation of a racially suspicious enemy figure propagated through the visual media and intended to absorb and redirect as much public resentment as possible” (2012, 171). In the same vein, Carol Fadda-Conrey posits that the “Orientalist discourse has taken on an additional policing role after 9/11, portraying Arabs and Muslims as perpetual aliens, volatile extremists, and potential or actual terrorists (in the case of

men) or oppressed, silenced, and disenfranchised subjects (in the case of women)” (2014, 2). In the same vein, Sally Howell and Andrew Shryock also point out that “non-Arabs began to use terms like “you people” when talking to Arab neighbors, relatives, and friends” (2003, 444). Using this phrase ‘you people’ suggests an attempt to protect from what Howell and Shryock term “collective guilt” (2003, 444).

Silke Schmidt contends that “9/11 revealed a general lack of knowledge about Muslims, Arabs, and Arab Americans and many unanswered questions which had existed long before the attacks” (2014, 14). Anglophone Arab literary responses to 9/11 attempt to address this context and respond to the level of the events. Nadine Naber believes that “one of the most effective ways to dismantle the virulent generalizations of Arab Americans is to humanize the people that are subject to them” (2000, 1). In this case, offering lesser heard narratives and carving a space in the literary arena contributed to the humanization of Arab Americans and made an attempt to break down common stereotyping of Arab Americans. Following the events of 2001, there emerged many novelistic voices articulating the tribulations of the voiceless, and also attempting to humanize Arabs and Muslims. Nouri Gana reflects that the “Anglophone Arab novels that appeared before or after September 11 have in many ways sought to educate Euro-Americans about Arabs and Muslims by dramatizing the yawning

gap between, on the one hand, the quotidian experiences of everyday Arabs and Muslims and, on the other hand, the free-floating and intransigent mainstream discourses of Arabness and Islam” (2015, 19). Also, in response to the tragedy of 9/11, there surfaced a sprouting scholarship on Arab Americans and their literature. Thus, post-9/11 Anglophone Arab fiction, as Gana noted, aims to challenge imperial hegemonies and systematic racism and to affirm cultural conviviality (2015, 22). She explains that “Arabs are saturated in the American imaginary with the Orientalist images, and most American students come to class not as a blank slate but rather with their imagination already informed or misinformed with those very Orientalist images” (2015, 30). Post-9/11 Anglophone Arab fiction offers contemporary readers new representations of Arabs and Arab Americans as well as conscious critical interventions in a contentious social and political context.

Some critics consider 9/11 as an opening to introduce the Arab in a new literary manner. Zuzana Tabačková argues that “9/11 prompted the representatives of Anglophone Arab literature to express their stance towards the attacks, and it also marked the birth of the reader of Anglophone Arab literature” (2015, 109). Al Maleh also explains that “the irony of Anglophone Arab literature is that it did not gain attention or attain recognition until the world woke up one day to the horror of the infamous 9/11 and asked itself who those ‘Arabs’

really were” (2009, 1). Consequently, post-9/11 writing remains educative and concerned mainly with racism, discrimination, and the burgeoning of Orientalist stereotypes. In their book *Framing Muslims: Stereotyping and Representation after 9/11*, Morey and Yaqin argue that “the time has come to examine closely the process of stereotyping; how certain images are deployed and circulated and how they anticipate an answer from the group being stereotyped” (2011, 22). Morey and Yaqin call for the exploration of the stereotyping mechanism as a whole which would eventually lead to the formulation of a de-orientalizing theory. Exposing the ‘othering’ of Arabs can also enhance certain anti-essentialist strategies to allow such ethnicity to speak and exert influence on mainstream discourse. Instead of fictionalizing 9/11, Arab American writers in their autobiographical narratives attempt to respond to 9/11 and reframe their image in a society inundated with anti-Arab sentiment.

De-Orientalizing the Arab

To de-orientalize the Arab in contemporary fiction is to initially employ and adopt certain discursive strategies, most notably the counter-narrative and deconstruction. The three Arab American novelists discussed in this article are among the first to employ these strategies, exposing hierarchy, power relationships, hegemony, and profiling in relation to the post-9/11 context. Laila Halaby is an Arab American novelist whose debut novel, *West of*

the Jordan (2003) won the prestigious PEN Beyond Margins Award. Her second novel *Once in A Promised Land* (2007) narrates the story of an Arab American couple in the wake of 9/11 attacks. The novel represents trauma and injustice and attempts to unravel much of the stereotyping that emerged as a response to the attacks. Halaby begins her novel by employing metafiction as a technique and asking the readers to deactivate their negative stereotypes of Arabs. She asks that the readers to examine their awareness of Arab Americans and stop creating Orientalist images offered by competing and fake representations. Her opening asks:

Before I tell you this story, I ask that you open the box and place in it any notions and preconceptions, any stereotypes with regard to Arabs and Muslims that you can find in your shirtsleeves and pockets, tucked in your briefcase, forgotten in your cosmetic bag, tidied away behind your ears, rolled up in your underwear, saved on your computer's hard drive (viii).

By employing this opening, Halaby invites into the novel a new readership; one that is open to understanding alternative perspectives on Arab Americans. She requests the reader to put aside the derogative and dehumanizing stereotypes: "There's room for all of your billionaires, bombers, and belly-dancers" (viii). She presents terrorists as external to the Islamic faith and not representatives of the Arab nation. Moreover, Halaby actually refuses to commence the telling of her narrative until the

reader consciously sets aside these established images. She demands:

No turbans, burqas, or violent culture[...]And for good measure, why don't you throw in those hateful names as well, ones you might never even utter: Sand Nigger, Rag Head, and Camel Jockey. You don't need them for this story [...] And finally, throw in those thoughts about submissive women [...] and hands cut off [...] and multiple wives [...] and militant bearded men (viii).

Halaby opens up alternative discursive spaces that encourage the inclusion and consideration of the Arab American voice. Debra Merskin states that “once an individual is defined as a social outsider on the basis of meeting a set of stereotypes, he finds himself in ‘symbolic exile’, often even denied the most fundamental trait of ‘having humanity’” (2004, 161). Halaby is well aware of the degradation of the Arab ethnicity, and the novel opens by explicitly addressing this issue. From the beginning of the novel, we find Halaby's characters struck with bewilderment regarding their representation in contemporary society. Jassim, while swimming in a pool, finds it hard to comprehend what has happened on 9/11 and his mind is fraught with doubt and confusion:

What entered into someone's mind to make him (them!) want to do such a thing? It was incompre-

hensible. And unnatural—human beings fought to survive, not to die. And had they, those many people who seemed to join together in crazy suicide, had any idea that they would cause such devastation? That both buildings would collapse? (20).

Though the main characters in the novel, Salwa and Jassim, are professional in their careers and dedicated to their work, holding American citizenships, and leading a secular life, they cannot escape a backlash following the attacks. As the narrative develops, Jassim and Salwa become aware of their real predicament as they are exposed to a number of demoralizing and humiliating experiences including surveillance, discrimination, prejudice and hostility. Jassim came to the United States as a simple, focused man whose main goal was to expand his knowledge so that he could improve his life and the lives of others. It is only after 9/11 he realizes that the world had split into two halves. His knowledge and skills become valueless when he is recognized in the American world as an Arab. His protest that “It’s crazy they’re not looking at who you are as a person, at all the great work you’ve done [...] they’re looking at the fact that you’re an Arab” (301) suggests his reduction to the ‘social hazard’ of Georgiana Banita’s words. Reducing him into such a state means that he is socially alienated which later results in identity crisis.

Rabih Alameddine approaches the post-9/11 context in a slightly different manner, weaving his novel *The*

Hakawati (2008) around the diverse past of Arabs in the Middle East. Encouraging readers to “listen” and put themselves “beyond imagining” in the first sentences of the novel, he reminds us that there can be no final answers or conclusions to these new contexts. Rabih Alameddine begins his novel by employing metafictional device borrowed from the Arabic tradition of storytelling: "Listen...Listen. Allow me to be your god. Let me take you on a journey beyond imaging. Let me tell you a story" (5). The purpose, as it is set in the first few words of the novel, is primarily to take the reader on a fascinating journey that is definitely beyond abstractions and mythical stereotypes. It is a deconstructive strategy to demonstrate to the reader the commonalities that exist between cultures. With stories full of imps, jinis, adventurous poets, historical heroes, both Middle Eastern and Western fables, the reader is exposed to a world that is medieval, yet modern and sometimes postmodern.

Alameddine delves deep into the ancient, medieval, and modern history of the Middle East. He delineates a history in an elegant manner, inviting the reader not to misunderstand but to explore. There is a long tradition of ‘hakawati’¹ in Arabic culture. The word ‘hekayah’ in Arabic means a story, fable, news; hakawati is derived from the Arabic word ‘haki’. Hakawatis are people who gain money from telling stories with an aim to beguile the listeners. From its title, Alameddine’s novel announces its aim to tell stories. However, this novel is not simply about stories but rather a project to cast the past afresh

in front of the reader. The novel attempts to offer a narrative matrix to readers, it contains many stories with mixed storylines from different resources and cultures, we find mythical stories, fables, stories from Islamic cultures, stories from Christianity and Quran, and also stories of the main character, Osama. By forging these tales altogether, Alameddine suggests that we are all made up of stories that converge and diverge across cultures and periods. In the novel, we find Jews, Arabs, Muslims, Christians, Druze, Lebanese, Egyptians, Armenians, Persians, Saudis, and Kurds, and all have different roles to play in constructing a single narrative structure. What is eloquently stressed in these astonishing stories is the fact that people; despite the disparity of their beliefs or political views, need to listen to each other and to respect each other's perspectives whatever the differences might be.

The Orientalist representation of Arabs did not depict them with any accuracy or respect, and the lack of exploration of this ethnicity prompted Alameddine to reject the one-dimensional caricature. His attempt is to deconstruct the Orientalist legacy and offer an amalgamation of Arabs and their cultural history. His reductive view is directed at the persistence of the Orientalist myths which form a frame of reference to the stereotypes of Arabs and Arab Americans. Borrowing different narrative frames, Alameddine's novel is built upon the notion of hybridity. It undermines the textual au-

thority that underlies the one coherent narrative voice. It is a response to what Morey and Yaqin identify as “the other half of a distorted dialogue” (2011, 5). A story never exists on its own, it is always created from the stories that the ‘hakawati’ has heard or invented before (Tabačková 2015, 221). In this case, Alameddine’s understanding of storytelling is similar to Roland Barthes’s notion of the author. The authoritative voice is eclipsed and borderlines between tales and genres are blurred. For him what matters is the finished product, regardless of authorial presence or intensions. In the Notes and Acknowledgment page of the novel, Alameddine states that “a storyteller is plagiarist” (2008, 515) and he enlists a number of sources included in his novel. He invokes Barthes conception of a text as “a tissue of citations, resulting from the thousand sources of culture” (1967, 7). Based on these conceptions, the novel presents an interesting model that accommodates multiple co-existing identities, multiple versions of truth, and numerous layers of competing realities.

Alameddine’s novel offers a non-official narrative of the Middle East. It incorporates religious tales of Abraham, Hagar, Noah, and other prophets, and also fictionalizes the ‘sirah’ books which are valorized in Islam. Threads of intertextuality feature the works and stories of classical Arab poets such as al-Mutanabbi, Abu Nawas, Antar and Abla, Layala and Majnoun, which all remain central to Arabic literary and cultural history. In one sense, Al-

ameddine seems obsessed with reminding Arab Americans with their cultural roots. In another sense, by injecting his novel with great Arab figures, he functions as a cultural informant with an educative aim. Nonetheless, intertextuality develops the narrative and gives credibility to the depiction in the novel.

In *The Hakawati*, Osama's storyline forms the centre of the novel. Osama is an Arab American who returns back to Lebanon to see his dying father. It is there in Lebanon that we know something about the history of the al-Kharat family and how they were the best storytellers in the whole region. One thing that the novel emphasizes is that 'Kharats' (liars in English) consider storytelling a profession. As professional storytellers, Kharats fabricate stories out of their imagination just to amuse the listeners and gain some money for the entertainment. What Alameddine tries to point out is that stories in the medieval Arabic literature, and even *The Arabian Nights*, were created for fun merely to amuse the princes and kings of that time. Just like poets of the princely court and corridors whose main concern was to praise and extol, Kharats are also similar in their attitudes. Alameddine, in this sense, employs irony. There is an attempt to deconstruct *The Arabian Nights* which is sometimes seen in the United States and Europe as the ethnographic source of information about Arabs, reducing it into its authentic form as a fictional tale.

The name “Osama” is also interesting particularly in 9/11 context. Uttering or hearing the name “Osama” has become fearful for almost all Americans, as it reminds them of Osama bin Laden. After 9/11 Osama bin Laden came into prominence, as it was claimed that it was he who planned and funded those terrorists who blew up the World Trade Center. Interestingly, Alameddine’s novel is narrated by a nice man called Osama. By doing this, Alameddine creates a new Osama whose goal is to entertain, not to terrorize. Alameddine’s Osama is half American and half Arab. Though he returns to his home which is Arab, he finds himself as a stranger. He has a universal perspective, and he is not fanatic at all. He tells us stories of European, Arabian, and Persian origins and by featuring Osama Al-Kharat in this manner, Alameddine intends to smash the American notion that all Arabs are like Osama bin Laden.

Alia Yunis’ *The Night Counter* is another novel which defiantly attempts to cast some light on the sources that even today perpetuate and enhance the cycle of stereotyping of Arabs. For this purpose, Yunis revives Scheherazade² and brings her to the twenty-first century United States. Yet, Scheherazade is no longer a narrator; she has been reversed from a teller to a listener. It is Fatima Abdullah, a Lebanese woman migrated to the United States, who narrates the stories. Fatima narrates her stories to Scheherazade, stories about her family, about the Middle East and also about life in the United States. Her stories re-

configure the Arab American heritage as well as culture. What is striking is Yunis' revival of Scheherazade in the American context. If we consider Edward Said's definition of Orientalism as "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (1987, 3), we may be able to consider why Alia Yunis casts Scheherazade in a new American mold. By revisiting Scheherazade, Alia Yunis attempts to gain access to American popular culture, and also aligns herself with her Arab past and heritage. Another important reason is that Scheherazade as the most prominent figure in *The Arabian Nights* is misrepresented in the United States, and Yunis, as noted by Vinson, "takes symbolic material from the *The Arabian Nights* and links it to other material within American frameworks" (2014, 57). She attempts to reshape and reframe the degenerative Orientalist images of Arabs from within the American society itself. *The Night Counter* not only recounts the history of Fatima Abdulla's family, but it rather investigates the various alterations of Scheherazade's image that continually reappear in the United States.

The Night Counter stresses reclaiming the Arab heritage through renewed and rehabilitating strategies of counter-narrative. Storytelling is essential in defining the self and creating modes of belonging. However, the oriental material culture is frequently appropriated and reproduced to confirm to the stereotypical images in American popular culture. Naomi Rosenblatt in this regard contends that "American vendors and business take

advantage of the aesthetics of Orientalism in order to encourage consumer spending and indulgence” (2009, 51). The novel also highlights the ways through which Arab Americans themselves contribute to the dissemination and circulation of the distorted images of Scheherazade. In the novel, the distorted images of Scheherazade have been manipulated by Fatima’s children and grandchildren as marketing strategies. For instance, Zade, Fatima’s grandson opens a hookah bar, naming it “Scheherazade’s Diwan Café” and lavishly decorating it with beautiful calligraphy and a drawing of a half-naked belly dancer, probably portraying Scheherazade. On the entrance to Zade’s café, Scheherazade is represented in attire that immediately recalls the images that have been entrenched by Orientalists. This affirms the extent to which the aesthetics of the Orient have been appropriated and become part of contemporary American culture. When she sees the distorted images, Yunis’s Scheherazade reluctantly refuses to recognize herself in a sexualized, commercialized manner. Another example that *The Night Counter* gives is Soraya, Fatima’s daughter, who takes on the name “Scheherazade the Magnificent” (2009, 132) just to gain money by doing an odd job. Dismayed by seeing how her distorted images have been easily made for the service of Orientalist, Scheherazade in a frenzied state rattles:

She—Scheherazade, daughter of the Great Wazir and wife of King Shahrayar, reciter of love stories, religious legends, and the poetry of the magnificent

Abu Nawas—was not a charlatan playing out people's fates with devil's cards and fiberglass balls (137).

Alia Yunis addresses the assimilationist attitudes embraced by some Arab Americans. In her novel, Randa and her husband, Bashar, show no interest in looking back at their Arab heritage. They desperately attempt to assimilate into the American culture so that they acquire 'whiteness status'. Randa dyes her hair blonde, changes her name to Randy, and gives her husband, Bashar, the name 'Bud'. Through these characters, the novel demonstrates the absurdity and contradictions that result from denouncing one's identity.

Post-9/11 New Vistas

In his article "Embargoed Literature", Edward Said labeled Arabic literature as an "embargoed literature"³ and, until the events of 9/11 it could be argued that the Arab world failed to represent itself and overcome an orientalizing legacy in literature. Today, many scholars, writers, and critics look upon 9/11 as turning point through which Arab American writers, activists, and scholars would gain agency and better represent themselves.

Edward Said makes it clear that "the relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of

domination, of varying degrees of complex hegemony” (1987, 5). The contemporary fictions discussed in this article are suggestive of how new representation can be achieved through articulating unheard stories, marginalized voices, and also questioning the static history of the orient itself. As Morey and Yaqin observe, “there is a gap existing between representation and reality” (2015, 1). In this regard, these alternative fictional modes of representations must be identified as a literary and political response to the othering of Arabs in a post-9/11 context. This requires cultural engagements with the West.

Zuzana Tabačková notes that “September 11 attacks mark the beginning of a post September 11 reader who becomes interested in works written by Anglophone Arab writers whose names begin to appear more frequently in American bookstores” (2015, 209). It is clearly indicated that prior to 9/11 the Arab American authors were not given sufficient significance in the American literary landscape. Consequently, 9/11 brought cultural, political, and literary changes, and the dire situation forced Arab Americans to speak and make themselves visible. Alameddine, by quoting from several sources and merging numerous forms, styles, and content, affirms that what defines the Western and the Eastern borders is merely fiction. The deconstructive method he employs enunciates a rejection of binarism and prejudice. He assumes that the issues of the Arabs and also the West lie in the stories that are sometime seen as ideologies. For

him, stories are merely fiction and do not reflect reality, since every story is a mere creation of the “Hakawati” whose aim is to gain some money by devising and telling stories. In his attitude, he conforms to what Edward Said pointed out that the East and the West are only fictional constructions (Said, 2002) and the encounter between these two poles has to be expanded. In *Once in a Promised Land*, Laila Halaby depicts the disillusionment that carried Jassim and Salwa into believing that they are attaining the American dream. Jassim is professional enough to achieve his American dream, but he is unfortunately rejected and denied access to the zone of American dream once he is identified as an Arab. The novel rather draws the Arab Americans to the realities of their presence in the United States.

Today diaspora writers and their hyphenated and hybrid identities attempt to bridge the gap that exists between cultures. The hybridity in their literary production could be seen as a significant point from which a dialogue can begin with the creation of what Homi Bhabha termed as the ‘third space’. Such a dialogue should necessarily bring about a restructuring of this notion, apart from Orientalist discourse. As it is employed in Bhabha’s post-colonial theory to encounter the persistent hierarchies, existing polarities, and symmetries between the East and the West, the concept of ‘third space’ could also serve the project of de-orientalizing the Arab. The interaction between the Arab culture and the American culture has

been stagnant since 9/11. Even any attempt to approach anything produced by Arabs is shadowed by prejudice and seen from a biased perspective. To break the ground of such cloudy relationship, 'third space' that is manifested in the Anglophone Arab fiction would smash the chains of loneliness that has been imposed on the Arab world. Hybrid in nature and having no predetermined politics or ideologies, such fiction would set a fresh ground on which further interactions between the two sides may flourish. Situated in 'the third space' would mean avoiding the perpetuation of antagonistic binarisms and constructing inclusionary and plural patterns of cultural exchange. Most of the characters in *Once in a Promised*, *The Hakawati*, and *The Night Counter* are naturally hybrid characters attempting to understand who they are as a mixture of different ethnicities and cultures. These characters carry a sense of ambivalence and in-betweenness as their hybrid identities are interposed in a space that goes between the center and margin. Despite the tension that may result from such a situation, hybridity can contribute to bridging the gaps between different cultures and thus, bringing them closer together in a mutual dialogue.

It is through such characters that understanding and intercultural interaction can come to existence. We can say that for such characters the pull of homeland and the charm of the host culture parallel each other. In such cases, the demand for 'the third space' is essential, since

through this space Arabs can find an opening for de-orientalizing their culture and confronting the dehumanizing stereotypes. By carving a space for themselves, they can counter, refute, and also offer authentic representations of themselves and the places they come from. To de-orientalize the Arab, it is very important to first develop intercultural understanding and construct a hybrid transnational identity. Alameddine's *The Hakawti* took the lead in initiating this project where the major characters celebrate being part of the American culture and the Arab one. The novel calls and invites the reader for intercultural dialogue. *The Night Counter* is also part of this project as it does not only stress the necessity of cross-cultural interaction, but also attempts to de-orientalize the Arab from within. In this sense, Anglophone Arab fiction offers Arab Americans an alternative space in which they can voice and narrate their own stories of life, to express themselves better to the American society, and also to imagine themselves as an important component of the American society, American literatures, and cultures.

As there is incessant move to radicalize Arab American culture, Arab Americans are supposed to create new form of self-representation. Despite the exciting flourishing of Arab American artistic and cultural venues, Fadda-Conrey realizes that "there still exist serious impediments to the flow and mobility of transnational enactments of identities" (2014, 183). Alia Yunis's novel

in a charming way provides us with disruptive appropriations as well as cultural relocations, depicting a whole range of the Arab American community. By adopting redemptive strategies, anti-nostalgic and celebratory embrace of various cultural flows that make up Arab American plurality, Yunis intends to mitigate the ongoing tensions within and between both Arab and American realities. The intersecting stories that she weaves in her novel open up a space for producing new intercultural understandings through the mobile flow of people between and across multiple and intersecting sites of identification and cultural expression. Hence, Alia Yunis offers us a trans-cultural narrative that does not only encompass the techniques from *The Arabian Nights* but also attempts to reverse the Orientalist image of Arabs in the United States from potential terrorism suspects into mere fictional representations.

Not only did September 11 fan the flames of Islamophobia in the United States, it also initiated a sort of a cultural renaissance of Arab and Muslim Americans. Despite despondency and apprehension exhibited against Arabs and Muslims, Ella Shohat and Evelyn Alsultany state that “the East has become increasingly interwoven into the American cultural fabric” (2013, 10). This is observed in Laila Halaby’s *Once in a Promised Land*, and Alia Yunis’s *The Night Counter*, two pieces of literature that weave the East and the West altogether. In *Once in a Promised Land*, the reader is introduced to two

cultures, familiar yet different, depicting varied aspects of living in a country that seems foreign and familiar as well. In *The Night Counter*, the reader comes across the history and stories of a multi-generational family that is exposed to the American life and culture more than the Arab one. Yunis attempts to tackle the issues of misrepresentations by invoking Scheherazade and giving her a contemporary personality. In doing so, Yunis aims at gaining access to the mainstream American culture where Scheherazade of *The Arabian Nights* is misrepresented, sexualized, and commercialized. Yunis also emphasizes on the cultural mobility which characterizes the third generation Arab Americans. The mobile flow of people between and across multiple landscapes and signposts that she depicts in the novel reflects her intended cultural expression. She succeeds in offering an intercultural text that embodies not only storytelling techniques of *The Arabian Nights*, but also a text that turns the Arab image in America from terror-suspects into violence-abhorrent citizens; human beings who socialize and need to interact with their communities like any other people. Anglophone Arab literature is today a medium through which Americans can gain better understanding and knowledge of the spiritual and intellectual make-up of Arabs and Arab Americans. It is in this literature that Americans can find authentic representations of Arabs much better than those in journalism, political memoirs, or historical reports.

To dispel the stereotypes, Arab and Arab Americans have to invest in defining themselves rather than waiting for others to define them. Fadda-Conrey recognizes the absence of Arab Americans in the Cultural and Ethnic Studies canon (2014, 175), and here she refers to the problem of institutionalizing since Arab American Studies has not been established as a field. To de-orientalize the Arab, there is a need to go beyond Orientalism and counter-discourses as these remain an obstacle for surpassing the stereotypes. Stereotypes take much time to wither away, therefore, Arabs and Arab American can alternatively create new cultural forms of representation. According to Schmidt, “writing against Orientalism continues to reinforce the prevalence of the concept while in addition preventing new approaches from flourishing” (2014, 41). The autobiographies discussed in this article resist the generalized abstractions of Arabs and Arab Americans, but the discursive strategies employed seem insufficient. Jack Shaheen attributed the constant reemerging of stereotypes to the lack of knowledge about Arabs and Arab Americans and he suggested ways the media, through detailed and balanced information procurement, can draw an alternative frame around the Arab (1984, 126). This necessitates developing an interdisciplinary methodology of media and literary studies, in particular, for restructuring the ‘self’ and breaking away from the Orientalist legacy. Schmidt contends that “in order to change the image of the Arab oil sheikh or the belly-dancing harem girl, alternative representations

of the Arabs cannot completely ignore former stereotypes; instead, they have to trigger positive evaluations on the basis of new and more detailed information” (2014, 114). Her view is that instead of the pure conflicting dichotomies of counter-discourses, discursive rivalries, as developed by Gary Fine, imply the plurality of discourses. Hence, the redefinition of the Arab American identity is a complementation rather than a confrontation.

Conclusion

The article explores some of the narrative strategies that Arab American novelists employ in constructing their identities and reversing the Orientalist stereotypes. The textual analysis reveals that works of fiction produced by the Anglophone Arab writers under examination here can establish bridges of trust and offer opportunities of intercultural understanding in a post-9/11 context. The novels offer new representations of contemporary Arab Americans struggling to author their own identities in the wake of the attacks and to negotiate changed cultural and political contexts. There is an obsession with family history and storytelling which indicates the need for redefining the ‘self’ and creating histories. Alameddine is keen on providing multifaceted characters of diverse backgrounds, while Halaby invests much effort in presenting the experiences of Arab Americans and exposing the realities imposed after 9/11. Alameddine’s

approach is rather celebratory not of the Middle Eastern cultures alone but of western cultures as well. Halaby, on the contrary, portrays the bleak picture of being an Arab in post 9/11 era. Her strategy is boldly counter-narrative, while Alameddine's is mostly deconstructive. They both employ metafictional devices to involve the reader more in dismembering the layers of the narrative. In Yunis' novel, there is a necessity to transcend a binary thinking and also a suggestion for addressing the issues of integration and hyphenation of identity. Responding to the attempts of disfiguring one's identity, *The Night Counter* stresses that distancing one's self from one's religion or culture cannot happen easily. Instead, the novel urges Arab Americans who initiate such desperate and pathetic attempts to try to embrace both cultures and pronounce them all with confidence and pride. To de-orientalize their culture, Arab Americans have to create multiple modes of authentic representation. The view presented in *The Night Counter* is that Arab Americans have to terminate disguising, covering themselves, and seeking a better agent or a better heritage. What they should do is to re-examine their heritage and benefit from stories like Scheherazade's. To further explain how they can imitate Scheherazade, Muhsin al-Musawi emphasizes that "Scheherazade succeeds in "defusing the morose king's vindictive [...] plan by deploying a "counter-narrative" that "works within the parameters of Islamic faith" (2009, 77). *The Night Counter* envisions a culture that is not seen as Oriental despotism or Is-

lamic terror, but it rather proposes a plural view that can accommodate various experiences of numerous ethnicities, races, and sexual orientations. Celebrating cultural differences and undermining the nostalgia deployed by some characters, *The Night Counter* strives to ventilate the tension created by the numerous realities imposed upon Arab Americans.

NOTES:

1. 'Hakawati' in Arabic means a teller of tales, myths, and fables, an entertainer, a highly skilled storyteller or fibster. It is an ancient art of storytelling in Arabic; an oral tradition with rich repertoire.

2. Scheherazade is a mythical heroine in the classic Arabian Nights. She is invoked in *The Night Counter* as a counter-narrative strategy and an attempt to de-orientalize the Arab from within. Most of the images associated with Scheherazade are those of the belly-dancer and half-naked Eastern woman.

3. Said argues that Arabic literature is 'embargoed' as it remains relatively unknown and unread in the West for certain geopolitical reasons. Said points out that Arabic is considered as a controversial language, and the embargo on Arabic literature reflects the Western perceptions of Arab nations

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