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THE MUSLIM FEMALE BODY IN TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY DISCOURSES
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A DISSERTATION APPROVED FOR THE
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

BY

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To my dad, Atef, who, though now physically absent from my world, is spiritually and emotionally alive in every cell of me. Dad, you are the first one to have taught me how to question social norms and how to think and act independently. In practice, you showed me what feminism means and what humanism is.

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To my uncle, Moe, who has long stood by my side.

To these four precious beings, I dedicate *The Muslim Female Body in Twenty-First-Century Discourses by Arab and Arab American Women Writers*.

My body is not your battleground
My hair is neither sacred nor cheap,
neither the cause of your disarray
nor the path to your liberation
My hair will not bring progress and clean water
if it flies unbraided in the breeze
It will not save us from our attackers
if it is wrapped and shielded from the sun
Untangle your hands from my hair
so I can comb and delight in it,
so I can honour and anoint it,
so I can spill it over the chest of my sweet love. (Kahf, *E-Mails From
Schehrazad* 58)

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Abstract

The Muslim Female Body in Twenty-First-Century Discourses by Arab and Arab American Women Writers employs a culturally symptomatic approach in its reading of various modes of representation of the Muslim female body. Analyzing visible as well as buried topics in selected twenty-first century Arab and Arab American women's novels, the dissertation examines dominant cultural constructions of the body within socio-political frameworks. In this context, both present and absent themes are equally important for understanding the production of knowledge by a literary text and, hence, the culture(s) a text symptomizes. To this end, it studies four twenty-first-century novels by Arab American women authors and three novels by Arab women writers, including Syrian American Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006), Jordanian American Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent* (2003), Palestinian American Randa Jarrar's *A Map of Home* (2008), Egyptian American Samia Serageldin's *The Cairo House* (2000), Egyptian Nawal El Saadawi's *Zeina* (2010; trans. 2011), Saudi Arabian Rajaa Abdalla Al-Sane's *Banāt al-Riyāḍ* (2005); trans. *Girls of Riyadh* (2007), and Egyptian Bedouin Miral al-Tahawy's *al-Khibā'* (1996); trans. *The Tent* (1998).

Part of the contribution of this dissertation is that it puts in the foreground what is in the background. By this I mean, it minutely traces and scrutinizes scattered details about the subject of the body of Muslim women across 21st-century Arab and Arab American women's literatures. Its main claim is that the perception of the Muslim female body is based on cultural fabrications. It seeks to deconstruct dominant one-dimensional interpretations of the position of the Muslim female body today, by laying

out the multiplicity of the ideological constraints that the body currently confronts. It views those ideologies as interwoven constituents of a web. At the same time, it teases out multiple modes of resistance that these writers develop to counteract Orientalist, Islamist, and other powers which manufacture and enforce dominant body images. The dissertation highlights the heterogeneity of the authors it deals with, paying close attention to the singular subjectivities of their production of knowledge. To do so, it shows how differences are augmented, multiplied, and rendered more nuanced when delineated within diasporic as well as national contexts. It evaluates how each novel positions itself in relation to damaging ideologies by assessing the counter-images that the writers create. The study discusses how those counter-pictures trouble, adhere to, or refute conventional constructions.

This project is both appreciative and critical of Michel Foucault's theory of the body. It extends Louis Althusser's theory of ideology. In analyzing the social construction of the Muslim female body, it aligns itself with a handful of body theorists, particularly Gayle Rubin, Elizabeth Grosz, Susan Bordo, and Lennard J. Davis.

Keywords: Arabophobia, Body Politics, Counterhegemonic Powers, Diaspora, Discourse, Feminism, Gender Construction, Habitus, Identity Politics, Ideology, Islamism, Islamophobia, Oppositional Cultures, Orientalism, Survivance, the Veil, and Zionism.

Introduction

In *The Muslim Female Body in Twenty-First-Century Discourses by Arab and Arab American Women Writers*, I employ a culturally symptomatic approach to various modes of representation of “the Muslim female body.” I focus on selected twenty-first century Arab and Arab American women’s novels in order to examine dominant cultural constructions of the body.¹ I use the phrase “the Muslim female body” to denote communally fabricated normative images of Arab Muslim women’s bodies both in the US and the Arab world. The main claim of my dissertation is that the perception of the Muslim female body is based on cultural fabrications.² The ways in which societies perceive the bodies of Muslim women are continuously and consistently built by an array of intersecting dogmas. While this claim might seem obvious, the dominance of the faulty assumptions regarding the Muslim female body—stemming from various discourses, especially Orientalism, Islamism, and classicism, as well as anti-Arab racism,³ nationalism, and capitalism—makes my statement not only necessary, but also urgent. To a remarkable extent, these damaging discourses employ similar methodologies in their oppression of Muslim women.

Orientalist discourses hope to prove that Islam is inherently sexist, an assumption which validates popular on-going colonial conversations about “Oriental” women’s racial plight. These discourses impose Western-constructed body ideologies on Muslim women. Likewise, Islamist discourses produce sexist and patriarchal assertions that perpetuate unjust gender binarism. For their part, classist discourses create narrow and restrictive interpretations of Muslim women’s economic standing and abilities. Such discourses exemplify how popular views of the Muslim female body are

created, habituated, and normalized, formulating cultural mythologies that endure generation after generation with no questions asked. And while there is no dearth of scholarship on Islamist and Orientalist injustices toward Muslim women, a cultural analysis of the normalization of the bodies of Muslim women, as manifested in contemporary Arab and Arab American literatures, has yet to be written.

In this context, my argument is that Muslim women are heterogeneous. Analyzing the ways in which the cultural construction of the Muslim female body is represented in discourses by Arab and Arab American women writers in the twenty-first century, I emphasize the complexity, richness, multiplicity, and individuality of experiences.⁴ I examine how these writers develop resistance strategies towards Orientalist,⁵ Islamist, and other powers which manufacture and enforce dominant body images. To be sure, my dissertation joins a body of scholarship by Islamic feminists on the journey of vocalizing Arab and Arab American women's responses to the powers produced especially by the prevalence today of Orientalist and Islamist discourses.

Part of the contribution of this dissertation is to put in the foreground what is in the background. It traces and scrutinizes minutely scattered details about the subject of the body of Muslim women across 21st century Arab and Arab American women's literatures. It creates compare-and-contrast body dialogues between and among them. Operating from the hypothesis that discourses create realities, I hope that the discourses my dissertation produces might help to transform the reality of injustices practiced against Arab and Arab American Muslim women today. By analyzing different ways in which the Muslim female body is fabricated, I hope to deconstruct, or at least to question, a key simplistic equation: Arab and Arab American women are oppressed

because of Islam. While I do not want to claim that they are not oppressed (saying so would be naïve because women across the globe are treated unfairly), I desire to highlight key heterogeneous causes for their oppression.

Before I proceed, it is necessary to unpack key underlying assumptions behind the title of this dissertation so as to avoid confusion. I use the singular expression, “the Muslim female body,” in an indicative, not descriptive, way. Throughout the dissertation, I critique this catchphrase, which I utilize strategically to bring together a number of intersecting ideologies. This expression can thus be read as a parody of how the bodies of Arab and Arab American Muslim women have long been singularized, prescribed, and defined at the hands of numerous social institutions, as well as cultural discourses.

I use the adjective “Muslim” in the title, as well as throughout the dissertation, to refer to associations with Islamic cultures, and not necessarily adoptions of Islam as a religious identity. I had considered using lowercase letters in “muslim” to subvert the dominant ready-made assumptions that the “muslimness” in each Muslim woman’s life is the sole determiner of the identity of her body, but for purposes of clarity I decided to abide by the regular spelling of the word.

“Muslim,” “Islamic,” and “Islamist” are three different terms. This dissertation is mainly concerned with Islamist discourse. I find Nadine Naber’s explanation of the difference to be useful. She notes:

To be a Muslim is to be born into a particular religious community
Muslims might be secular, occasionally observing some ritual Muslims

might even be atheists. Islamists, on the other hand, achieve their sometimes militant identity by devoting their lives to the establishment of an Islamic state. The Islamic identification connotes another form of achieved identity, which is highly volatile and contingent. “Islamic” bridges these two poles of Muslim and Islamist identifications. It describes a particular kind of self-positioning that will then inform the speech, the action, the writing, or the way of life adopted by someone who is committed to questioning Islamic epistemology as an expansion of their faith position and not a rejection of it. (*Arab and Arab American Feminisms* 61)

My underlying assumption is that Islam has granted women social and gender justice. It is the specific ideologies produced by political Islam (Islamist discourses) that are unjust towards women. Discussing women’s rights in Islam is outside the scope of this project.⁶

The novelists this dissertation examines embody different levels of religiosity. Some authors are not Muslim; others do not identify themselves as Muslim; and yet others are not practicing Muslims. However, all the writers whose works I explore are embedded in Islamic cultures in one way or another. For example, Mohja Kahf and Rajaa Al-Sane identify themselves as Muslim. Abu-Jaber is associated with Islam through her father’s heritage only. Though born a Muslim, Nawal El Sadawy has become critical of monotheistic religions, including Islam. Miral al-Tahawi expresses a specifically Islamic Egyptian Bedouin cultural context, which shows no influence of Islamism, but displays pre-Islamic traditions. My seven authors discuss what I refer to as the Muslim female body.

I use the category “women” purposefully.⁷ I am convinced that Arab and Arab American Muslim women confront specific body issues which men do not. Therefore, I strategically keep this group identity so as to articulate its problems. Adopting this approach, I follow Indian cultural feminist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s advocacy for

“strategic essentialism” and Native American (Creek-Cherokee) critic Craig Womack’s defense of tribal specificity. Both writers argue convincingly that in order to be able to address social injustices of marginalized groups, identitarian categories such as “subaltern” and “tribal” people need to be preserved. For my part, I keep the category women to voice Arab and Arab American women’s issues.

Although some critics might argue that the subject of this dissertation may run the risk of confirming dominant cultural stereotypes associated with Arab and/ or Muslim women, I believe that overlooking these powerful ideologies is academically unethical. Therefore, I do not run away from stereotypes. Quite the opposite. I atomize their grand statements by closely studying their various ideological causes such as Islamism, Orientalism (for example, anti-Arab racism), nationalism, cultural patriarchy, and classism. Taking this path despite the cultural sensitivity of the topic, I endorse Arlene Elowe Macleod’s argument that the “polemics of global feminist discourse create a context in which it becomes difficult to talk about women’s subordination at all without contributing to earlier stereotypes, yet avoiding the topic of women’s subordination creates a feminism that celebrates difference, but loses its foundation for *ethical* judgment” (58; emphasis added). Similar to Macleod, I am conscious of global feminism’s standpoint on identity politics. I am also conscious of potential resistance for my discussions at the hands of some Arab and Muslim women and men, who might fear “airing dirty laundry in public.”

The example of “subordination” this dissertation deals with is the subordination of the body to various fabricated norms. Yet, this subordination is not separated from

resistance, as I argue. There are layers of resistance that have yet to be organized by Arab and Arab American feminists. It is true that through offering micro as well as macro analyses of stereotypes I make them more observable, but clarity is not the problem. I share Audre Lorde's view that the "visibility which makes us most vulnerable is that which also is the source of our greatest strength. Because the machine will try to grind you into dust anyway, whether or not we speak" (42).

Yet, in order for me to not be trapped by the very cultural stereotypes, of which I am critical, I highlight the heterogeneity of the authors I deal with, paying close attention to the singular subjectivity of their production of knowledge. To this end, I show how differences are augmented, multiplied, and rendered more nuanced when delineated within diasporic and national contexts. I evaluate how each novel positions itself in relation to damaging ideologies by assessing the counter-images writers produce. I discuss how those counter- images trouble, adhere to, or refute conventional constructions.

Recent scholarship on Arab and Arab American feminisms has paid much attention to the issue of having to defend Islam against categorical stereotypes of the West.⁸ Susan Muaddi Darraj disagrees with Gloria Steinem's famous feminist argument that "The personal is political" ("Personal and Political" 250). Darraj elaborates that one's family and community constitute key personal battlegrounds. In addition, US political and economic interferences in the Arab world, including its growing discourses on Arabs and Muslims, create now the political dynamics of Arab American realities and literatures. Darraj rightly argues that both battlegrounds are sexist, but in different ways. She concludes that all claims by Arab American feminists ought to be perceived

as political because they represent critiques of the politics of the US against the Middle East. I subscribe to Darraj's argument that Arab American women need to fight against injustices in their family, social, and political lives. I, too, see these oppressive realities as different, if related. Yet, throughout my dissertation, I seek to explore the dialectical relationship between the personal and the political interactions of the private and public spheres.

On this same cultural dilemma, Nadine Nabir argues that the personal and the political intermix. Thus, she recommends that issues of Arab and Arab American gender and sexuality be positioned in explicit socio-political frames.⁹ Naber argues that separating "internal" (Arab world and Arab American) communities and "external" ones (global communities) is wrong. She advises scholars to get rid of their "fear of washing [their] dirty laundry in public" (87). One way in which critics may deal with this problem, Naber says, is by highlighting the differences within Arab and Arab American women's spheres. I agree. Separating these two sources of problems is not only faulty, but also unnatural.

Further, Amira Jarmakani asserts that having to preface Arab American literature with rejections of prevailing claims on female oppression in Islam drains Arab and Arab American feminists' energy and distracts them from writing about other issues such as the veiled visibility. Defending Islam becomes a burden on their shoulders. This imposed didactic role is dangerous because it risks repeating, perhaps unconsciously, the famous Orientalist rhetoric, for scholars might be tempted to represent Arab and Arab American women in the same abstract way Orientalists do. Jarmakani correctly observes that both colonialist and nativist discourses have manipulated the veil.

image of the veil has been appropriated and deployed . . . by colonialist and imperialist powers to justify domination It has also been utilized as a symbol of cultural authenticity in anticolonial nationalist movements and as a loaded marker in debates about “civilization,” modernity, and liberal-democratic citizenship, all of which tend to obscure discussion of the ways Muslim women negotiate faith and piety. (“Arab American Feminisms” 228-229)

Moreover, Jarmakani notes that imperialist and nationalist fabrications of the “mythology of the veil,” (229) which constitute signifiers for barbarism and cultural preservation, operate through a paradoxical mechanism: simultaneous “invisibility” and “hypervisibility” of Muslim women. Both parties speak *for*, not *to*, women. Those mechanisms make Arab Muslim women invisible because they can only work through the annihilation of female subjectivity. Invisibility is a catalyst here. Yet at the same time, the two groups are forced to make women “hypervisible,” because, by definition, the propaganda about the veil works only *through* Muslim women. In other words, women’s silence is assumed; women cannot speak for themselves. The light is focused on them as a medium that is necessary to prove Occidental and Oriental claims. This “hypervisibility” forces Arab American feminists to deal with such constructed cultural mythologies. According to Jarmakani, one way to escape this Catch-22 dilemma is to use silence and invisibility tactically so as to develop “oppositional consciousness” (230).¹⁰ She argues that “mobilizing the politics of invisibility helps to disarm the notion that silence and invisibility are necessarily oppressive and opens up a wider field of interventions for Arab American feminists” (240). Here I infer that Jarmakani opposes feminist “counternarratives” and “counterdiscourses.”

I both agree and disagree with Jarmakani’s recommendation for moving beyond identity politics, that is to say, beyond the need to respond to cultural stereotypes and/or to produce counter-narratives. In theory, I share her argument that Arab American

women writers need not worry about writing back, yet in practice, I strongly believe that not doing so is a pricey luxury. Therefore, I maintain that Arab American women writers need to develop a “double consciousness.” They need to critique the present and imagine a different future reality simultaneously. I am saying that it is necessary for Arab American authors to focus one eye on negotiating the present and another eye on carving out a future for themselves. Here, I am inspired by Gloria Steinem, who argues that feminists must operate from a “double-consciousness” model in relation to what is happening in their present and to what they could bring to the future (*The Power of Ideas*).

My goal, then, is to extend existing arguments that have identified the double battlegrounds Arab American women writers fight. I do so by arguing that this dilemma does not constitute a repressive situation; it, in fact, represents a productive opportunity. Behind my main claims on the body in this dissertation is a guided adoption of French historian and philosopher Michel Foucault’s theory of the body. Inspired by Foucault, I argue that the only way in which a change of the Muslim female body realities may happen is by understanding the mechanism of powers. Realities take place in discourses. To meet this goal, I look at the interrelatedness of knowledge, power, and the socially constructed truth of the Muslim female body. I discuss key discourses of resistance produced by selected twenty-first-century novels by Arab and Arab American women writers.

In this sense, my dissertation investigates why contemporary society is obsessed with the repression of Muslim women’s bodies. Scrutinizing seven contemporary texts

by Arab and Arab American women writers, I analyze major reasons behind the fear of (on the part of Orientalist discourses) and the justification for (on the part of Islamist discourses) existing discourses on the Muslim female body. In particular, I discuss ways in which powers such as Orientalism and Islamism create abundant dialogues about the body to convince us that the Muslim female body tells its own truth; if covered, then it must be oppressed; and if not, then it is immoral. One is made to believe that the body tells ultimate facts of not only individuals but also institutions such as families, states, and religions. In other words, these two parties insist that the body has to tell us a truth. In case of Islamist discourses, the truth is related to national, nativist, authentic identities. As for Orientalist discourses, the truth articulates its relationship to modernity, violence, and oppression, which are “inherent” in Islam. Such discourses employ body politics to gain power. They produce repressive powers on the body while claiming that this power is liberating. My detailed analysis of the ways in which these discourses operate aims to discuss various ways of fighting for social justice.

Like other poststructuralist feminists, I utilize Foucault’s theory of the body as a site of power struggle that is not completely repressive but also productive. Like them, I am aware of Foucault’s androcentrism and gender-blindness. For my part, I am critical of Foucault’s ethnocentrism and religion-blindness. I am aware that some feminists have argued that Foucault’s poststructuralist project does not help minorities or “third world” groups to develop oppositional cultures, mainly because of his pessimism and rejections of universal humanism and universal human subjectivity. Yet, like Jana Sawicki, I believe that Foucault’s anti-romantic theory of the body need not be accepted totally or rejected altogether. Sawicki recognizes that

Foucault's emphasis on self-refusal and displacement could be risky insofar as it might undermine the self-assertion of oppositional groups and suppress the emergence of oppositional consciousness. At the same time, he rightly calls to our attention the risks involved in becoming too comfortable with oneself, one's community, one's sense of reality, one's "truths," the grounds on which one's feminist consciousness emerges. (107)

Foucault's concept of biopower is of much significance to my project. He argues that power comes from everywhere via discourses, institutions, and disciplines; at the same time, it prompts resistances. The ways in which power works are "non-egalitarian" and "mobile." The relationship between power and subjects is not exterior, because power is an immanent part of the everyday interiority of subjects. Besides its acknowledged prohibiting function, power has a productive role. Through the lens of Foucault's theory of biopower, I study what I evaluate as many "arms of a spider web," multiple factors, especially institutional, which create the Muslim female body. At the same time, I explore counterhegemonic powers that the discourse of contemporary writers produces. Like Foucault, I see the power of discourses to be not completely encompassing, determinate, or inclusive.

Therefore, I insist that Islamic feminists need to scrutinize, and not fear, the different powers exercised on the Muslim female body. Resisting these powers, one needs to remember that they do not have to disappear to be overcome. The powers that manufacture the Muslim female body originate in different positions in Arab and the Arab American worlds. The process through which these powers create the body are dynamic. Though not completely egalitarian (their hierarchy is situation-based), it changes in a chameleon-like manner to enclose its victim. Arab and Islamic feminists need to understand the mechanisms of these powers well to be able to resist them.

Foucault's argument about resistance raises important questions for my project. For Foucault, resistance is not the opposite of power; it does not exist outside of power; rather, it is a necessary component of how power operates. Basically, he explains that the game of power and resistance is predestined: "Just as the network of power relations ends by forming a dense web that passes through apparatuses and institutions, without being exactly localized in them, so too the swarm of points of resistance traverses social stratifications and individual unities" (*History of Sexuality* 96). To simplify, this means that both social institutions and subjects are necessary for the operation of power, in which resistance is a key component.

Although Foucault defines social powers as hierarchical, he argues that power pre-exists subjects and institutions. I find this contradictory. The latter are single mediums through which power works. In a paragraph entitled "The Uniformity of the Apparatus," Foucault argues that the institution through which power operates does not really matter: "Power over sex is exercised in the same way at all levels . . . whatever the devices or the institutions on which it relies, it acts in a uniform and comprehensive manner Confronted by a power that is law, the subject who is constituted as subject—who is 'subjected'—is he who obeys" (*History of Sexuality* 85). Here I question two unstated assumptions behind Foucault's argument: egalitarianism of institutional powers and sameness of subjects. I find these suppositions unconvincing.

In opposition to Foucault, I deal with how a number of institutions collaboratively manufacture the Muslim female body without assuming any equality of apparatuses. It is true that there is codependency among these powers, but this does not mean that they are of equal status. Therefore, I argue that the power each apparatus

manifests in the life of Muslim Arab (American) women depends on the specific sociopolitical contexts in which the individual woman lives. Thus, unlike Foucault, I credit individual experiences. But similar to him, I see that modern powers come from below. This is the ground of my claim that Islam does not lead to the oppression of the Muslim female body in isolation from patriarchal institutions and ideologies. One important task of my dissertation is to analyze how institutional ideologies are both different and similar and to show how they work separately and relationally.

Although, like Foucault, I see that such powers work from within, rather than from without, I intend to prove that there is room for a different perception of the perception of the female body, and for the autonomy of the Muslim female individuals. The kind of autonomy I have in mind here is not built on naïve assumptions that Arab and Arab American women may completely isolate themselves from the apparatuses that mold them. No one can. Obviously. Rather, I adopt a stance that Foucault builds in the beginning of his *The History of Sexuality*, yet never completes. He argues that the only way in which one may make any change is to understand the structure of power (in his case, the interrelatedness of knowledge, power, and sexuality) so as to be able to deconstruct it. Foucault states that discourses on sex do not automatically liberate people from constructed sexual ideologies. By extension, I discuss how discourses on the body might help change its current social positions. Different from Foucault's total modern power, the bodies of Muslim subjects, both males and female, are subject to both sovereign (godly) power and other powers, which include Islamist and Orientalist (mis)interpretations of sovereign power. Through this route I join Islamic feminist discourses.¹¹

Interwoven with the Foucauldian approach is my extension of French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser's theory of ideology. In his milestone essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)," Althusser dissects the ways in which social institutions transform individuals into subjects by systematic shaping and productive ideologies. He qualifies the police, the court, and the army as "Repressive State Apparatuses," for their demands dictate certain behaviors. But simultaneously, he lays out the institutions which govern the subjects through ideology, the Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), namely the religious ISA, the educational ISA, the family ISA, the legal ISA, the political ISA, the union ISA, the media ISA, and the cultural ISA. Systematic "production" and "reproduction" of ideologies maintain the power of societies over the individual. The order in which Althusser puts these institutions does not matter for my project—Althusser admits that his work is tentative and thus invites scholars to further study and modify it. Although he chooses to deal with these two "apparatuses" as different entities, he is conscious that, in practice, there are overlaps; both forces operate through repression and ideology simultaneously, but they do so in different phases. Defining ideology, Althusser states:

Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence . . . it is not their real conditions of existence, their real world, that "men" "represent to themselves" in ideology, but above all it is their relation to those conditions of existence which is represented to them there. It is this relation which is at the center of every ideological, i.e. imaginary, representation of the real world. It is this relation that contains the "cause" which has to explain the imaginary distortion of the ideological representation of the real world. (101)

The essence of Althusser's words is that ideology determines the relationship between the individual subject and his reality. What that means is that the way in which the individual relates to the world is neither decided upon by the individual himself nor is it

a natural act; it is a process, which is fabricated, constructed, and performed outside him and through him. Imagination plays a key role here, opening a place for literature.

Although Althusser does not speak about the construction of the body, let alone the Muslim female body, I find his systematic analysis of how individuals get socially constructed through a number of cooperating institutions to be useful for my examination of the multiple creations and maintenance of the Muslim female body. I employ Althusser's account of ideology, but the institutions I deal with are not identical with his. Last, but not least, I am critical of his complete negation of the free will of individuals.

In analyzing the social construction of the Muslim female body, I align my work with a handful of body theorists—in particular, Gayle Rubin, Elizabeth Grosz, and Susan Bordo. The need to criticize religious discourses on female bodies is not exclusive to Islam. Gayle Rubin employs a queer ideology critique in her analysis of the pre-contemporary politics of sex in the US and England. Among the “manufacturers” of the sexual ideologies Rubin observes are “the churches, the family, the shrines, and the media” (“Thinking Sex” 294). Rubin insists that sex is “always political” (267). Through the perspective of an Islamic feminist, I complicate Rubin's argument. The main reason Rubin criticizes Christianity is that it does not value sex for pleasure; it treats sex as a tool for production. Differently, I point out that, though Islam encourages bodily and sexual pleasures within the institution of marriage, patriarchal interpretations of Islam still maintain female sexual oppression and continue to invent sexual taboos.

Likewise, Elizabeth Grosz's often-cited book, *Volatile Bodies* is of much significance to my project. Conversing with a number of psychoanalytic theorists, philosophers, and feminists, Grosz investigates what constitutes the human body. The main philosophical argument of Grosz's work is that the human bodies are both subjects and objects. They are subjects in the sense that they partially define how individuals perceive their world. And they are objects because they are defined, in part, by what is outside them. The latter includes cultural contexts, notably socially manufactured knowledge, which governs not only how one's body is demarcated but also how it relates to other bodies. Grosz's principal claim is that the body is a result of a simultaneity of ontology and epistemology, or of essence and knowledge. This means that the body is not a raw or pre-cultural material that is inscribed by social constructionism. It is an infinite and indeterminate process that is continuously shaped by the dialectic between what is within it and what is outside it. Though I embrace Grosz's standpoint on cultural constructionism, I am critical of her biological assumptions. Obviously, Grosz speaks from a Western perspective and does not address repressed sexuality. She offers a universal body theory that does not take into account Muslim women. My project goes beyond Grosz's by focusing on the body issues that face contemporary Arab American Muslim women.

I also extend Susan Bordo's powerful argument about how Western cultures construct dominant female images. Bordo analyzes how Western societies misuse dietary and exercise rituals to imprison the Western female subject. I deal with Bordo at length in the dissertation. The essence of Bordo's words might be simple yet significant;

the problem of the Western body does not lie in its absorption of the social ideologies that are behind these acts.

For my part, I perceive the body as a material entity (not an abstract or natural concept), which is both a product and a creator of culture. I use the noun body to encompass various body-related themes, which, together, formulate dominant images of the Muslim female body. I address various body issues in sociopolitical contexts. Several issues appear in more than one chapter to show the differences as well as the commonalities among various works. Many of the body issues the authors I study here discuss cut across race, religion, class, and gender. I insist that no one work should be read as a representative of Arab or Arab American literature by women.

Chapter One

Veiling, Unveiling, Reveiling: Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006)

Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* is an influential Arab American literary work of the early twenty-first century. Steven Salaita and Neil Macfarquhar have it right in saying that this novel “quickly went on to become one of the most critically and commercially successful Arab American novels” (Salaita, *Modern Arab American Fiction* 32), and that it “turned Ms. Kahf into something of an idol among Muslim American women” (Macfarquhar 9). The purpose of this chapter is to show how Kahf's work of fiction responds to the current cultural dilemmas that contemporary Arab American women writers are facing. As discussed in the introduction, on the one hand, Arab American writers do not want to feed Orientalist discourses by criticizing gender injustices within institutionalized Islamic communities. On the other hand, they correctly feel the urgency to critique those prejudices because their definition of feminist agency necessitates fighting against Orientalist sexist thoughts. To a considerate extent, my analysis of the representation of Arab American Muslim women in *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* is driven by a desire to assess how the novel answers Nadine Naber's significant query about how Arab American writers can “speak frankly about [their] experiences in ways that neither reinscribe Arab bashing nor engage in Orientalism” (“Decolonizing Culture” 89). My chapter addresses these cultural issues.

I evaluate Islamist and Orientalist discourses on the Muslim female body in Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*. Since the novel has more to say on Islamism than Orientalism,¹ this chapter offers a more detailed account of the former than it does of the latter. In a Foucauldian manner, it considers the author's portrayal of these two discourses as both repressive and productive. However, it claims that, though *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* succeeds in graphically showing its readers various examples of injustice against Arab American Muslim women, its method of deconstruction leads to a construction of mythologies that are no less problematic. Its depictions risk desacralizing the veil, reinforcing patriarchy, and implying a single viewpoint of what good Islam is. Meanwhile, Kahf's pluralistic and dynamic definitions of the Muslim female body is not at all negative. It calls positively for an active reader who is committed to analyzing rather than to describing. Yet, I worry that the novel may be perceived as representative of all Arab American Muslim women's communities. Therefore, the ways in which Kahf discusses Arab American social problems need to be seen as perspectival, rather than representational of the truth of Arab and Arab American Muslim women or of Muslims at large, as some critics have argued.² This is mainly why I highlight Kahf's uniqueness.

I structure this chapter by introducing Kahf's body theory in *The Girl in The Tangerine Scarf*; highlighting Kahf's critical position through addressing her biography and scanning her oeuvre; offering a critical overview of the novel's narrative; then providing an in-depth analysis of the production of Islamist ideologies in relation to the Muslim female body at the hands of three institutions: Islamic communities, Islamic marriages (as perceived by patriarchal Muslim males), and Islamist states. After that, I

shift the lens of my diagnostic camera towards the ways in which those body ideologies are constructed by US Orientalism. I focus mainly on two institutions. Following these institutional analyses, the chapter focuses on the female protagonist, Khadra, to illustrate how Kahf challenges body constructions through her discussion of the veil. And lastly, I examine the role of another important female character, Zuhura, who develops Kahf's critique of both Islamism's and Orientalism's creation of the Muslim female body. The ratio between my discussion of Islamism and Orientalism in *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* reflects the novel's proportionate representations of them. In addition to the politics of the veil, this chapter addresses the key issues of virginity and sexuality in relation to marriage. The chapter's critique of Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* does not contradict its appreciation of the influence and value of the novel.

Islamic Feminism, Poststructuralism, and Body Studies

Mohja Kahf writes about gender equality from a diasporic Islamic feminist position. Islam is a theme in the novel, which makes it stand out among other Arab American novels. Salaita correctly observes that “[b]efore the publication of *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, most Arab American novelists treated the culture and practice of Islam either tangentially or intermittently Kahf is one of the first American writers to explore fictively the practitioners of conservative Islam in the United States” (*Modern Arab American Fiction* 32). Kahf's dual identity shapes *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf's* particular focus on Muslim female subjects located in pluralized transnational contexts. In this regard, Kahf agrees with Shahnaz Khan's Islamic feminist claim that “progressive politics cannot emerge from either Islam or Orientalism

but in the in-between hybridized third space” (xx).³ Not surprisingly, Kahf writes for a range of audiences.⁴ In the novel, she offers an insider’s view of the heterogeneity of Arab American Muslim women. Her first-hand knowledge responds to numerous Orientalist fantasies. At the same time, it raises the reader’s consciousness to a long list of patriarchal Islamist mythologies, which many Muslim women have been trained to accept. Discussing the hardships that her Syrian female protagonist, Khadra, confronts in the American diaspora, Kahf argues that Arab American Muslim women need to develop a new space that is located outside both Orientalist and Islamist realms. It is important to note here that the novel does not idealize diaspora. As will be clear through textual examples, Kahf points out that imposing dividing lines between Islam and feminism, as well as between home and diaspora, is confining.

In *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, as in many of her other writings, Mohja Kahf operates within a poststructuralist frame of Islamic feminism.⁵ For example, she historicizes and contextualizes multiple body mythologies, showing her readers how discourses formulate realities. In addition, the novel questions multiple binary oppositions such as the East versus the West; Muslims versus non-Muslims; Arabs versus non-Arabs; nationalism versus colonialism; Islamism versus Orientalism; and most importantly to my cause, veiled versus unveiled modes of dress. Yet, I observe that the novel does not deconstruct the categories men/women nor does it address transgender issues of identity. But it *tolerates* “normal” as well as “deviant” sexual orientations. The specific poststructuralist philosophy Kahf adheres to is grounded in material existence. It does not entertain abstract body concepts common in some poststructuralist feminist literatures. For example, the novel does not celebrate different

conceptualizations of the veil merely for the sake of rejoicing in difference. This poststructuralist model concretely questions readily accepted simplistic definitions of what an ideal Arab American Muslim body is.

Not only does Kahf's poststructuralist feminist apparatus insist on a representational function but it is also committed to offering a political statement, a "strife" or a "jihad" for achieving gender justice.⁶ Her main resistance strategy is to defamiliarize the context in which both Orientalists and Islamists normalize, singularize, and immortalize various body mythologies. Kahf's responsibility, then, is to contextualize, pluralize, heterogenize, and historicize these myths. Dealing with key ideological tools, Kahf demonstrates how multiple "truths" about the Muslim female body get produced. She does this boldly, provocatively, and fearlessly.

What does Mohja Kahf mean by "the jihad for gender justice?" In "The Pity Committee and the Careful Reader," Kahf critiques Orientalists' and Islamists' handling of the gender issues that pertain to Muslim women.⁷ She insists that in both cases, it is Muslim women who pay the price. Analyzing prevalent Orientalist and Islamist arguments regarding Muslim women, Kahf observes two ideologies. The first is associated with Orientalism and the second with Islamism. 1- The first, "Victim-Escapée narrative," she qualifies as "neo-Orientalist Pity Committee" (112). As a result, Islam is described as innately misogynist. Consequently, Muslim women are portrayed as escapees, running from Islam in particular and from the Orient at large to the rescuing West. This category allows for two possible positions for Muslim women. (A) One has a complaining "voice," loaded with negativity about her culture; the West often views Muslim woman's ability to communicate as an exceptional case, which is never

in harmony with, and always in opposition to, her “Muslimness.” (B) The voiceless figure lets the other, who is the West, speak for her. Kahf successfully calls this type “[m]ute marionette or Exceptional Escapee” (116). Explaining this Orientalist narrative, she argues, “The Pity Committee’s Muslim woman is not a speaking subject in her own right but framed within the narrative of the Westerner giving her a voice, who alone is able to construct and analyze her plight” (116), hence the label, neo-Orientalists; the Orient is always an object and the Occident is a subject.

The second category, Islamist, Kahf labels “Defensive Brigades, or Muslim Apologists” (113), who espouse an ideology which insists on idealizing Muslims and denying any sexism and patriarchy in Muslim worlds. Critiquing patriarchal Islamism, she states, “This camp’s knee-jerk defensive discourse on Muslim women demonizes anyone attempting to change the status quo” (113). Correctly, she observes that what unifies the two “parties” is that they both fixate and reduce the identity not only of Muslim women but also of Islam: “Where the pity Committee vilifies, the Defensive Brigade sugarcoats, rather than seeking genuine complex analysis of gender relations in the world of Islam” (119). By the same token, in her “The Muslim in the Mirror,” Kahf questions the sexism within Islamist discourses, inviting Muslims to be critical of the patriarchal interpretations of the *Quran* that produce mythologies. Thus, highlighting pluralism within Islam, Kahf supports a simultaneous critique of both Orientalist and Islamist discriminations.

Having briefly explained Kahf’s Islamic feminist poststructuralist model, I note here how it fits in the larger context of Body Studies. Kahf shares Elizabeth Grosz’s views that human bodies constitute a “page” on which culture writes its definition, yet

this “page” is not initially empty. It is an infinite and indeterminate process that is continuously formulated by the interactions between what is within it (for instance, its sexual specificity) and what is outside it (culture—outside here also refers to geographical fact). *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* points out that there is no contradiction between the corporeality of the body—the body as a materialist entity that occupies a definite space and is marked by individual differences (both innate and constructed)—and its being a “surface,” which is unceasingly shaped by the interrelatedness of the psyche of the individual and the collective production of knowledge about the body of that same individual. The novel presents an array of social institutions that formulate the human body. As such, readers get an account of Arab American Muslim bodily practices on a daily basis—such matters include washing, eating, cleansing the dead, preparing for the pilgrimage to Mecca, and praying. This chapter, then, deals with how the “page” of the Muslim female body gets inscribed by Islamist and Orientalist cultures; it assesses Kahf’s assertion of how this “leaf” can be indefinitely loaded, unloaded, and reloaded.

Kahf’s Critical Position: Biography and Oeuvre

What are the real-life contexts that contribute to Kahf’s body theories? Born to highly-educated Syrian parents involved in Syrian political opposition, Mohja Kahf had to move from Syria to the US at the age of four. She writes from the standpoint of a first-generation American.⁸ Kahf earned a Ph.D. degree in comparative literature at Rutgers University and is now an associate professor of comparative literature at the King Fahd Center for Middle East and Islamic Studies at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville.⁹ Her specialization in comparative literature and her fluency in Arabic and

English are important tools that are evident in *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*. Kahf's Ph.D. dissertation, published as *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman: From Termagant to Odalisque* (1999), investigates Western representations of Muslim women across various historical eras: Medieval, Renaissance, Enlightenment, and Romanticism. Her project analyzes the dynamism of associated cultural stereotypes. It examines various ways in which the Muslim woman is objectified and victimized in those eras. In her "Braiding the Stories," Kahf studies how Muslim women have always contributed to religious and secular arguments, mainly by drawing on Islamic history. Referencing the *Quran*, Kahf insists that being an Islamic feminist is not an oxymoron. She argues, and I agree, that Islamic feminism is in harmony with, and not in opposition to, Islam. Her literary strategies, clear in her drawing from an array of literary traditions as well as translational and transnational references, target multiple audiences. Kahf's struggle for gender equality is not only theoretical but also activist. For example, she has helped found a group that works for equal treatment of women within the mosques, "the Daughters of Hajar." In 1995, she openly critiqued the separation between the sexes in the mosques in Arkansas. In this regard, she argues that she does not need a "room," but a "space,"¹⁰ which signifies a position to freely express herself at the mosque. Kahf is an activist Islamic feminist.

Over the years, Kahf has developed an all-inclusive interpretation of Islam. In her own personal life, she applies her poststructuralist philosophy on the veil; she embraces the veil as an identity marker and yet refuses to be defined by it. This is why she purposefully puts it on sometimes and takes it off at other times. I find this marriage of academic theory and personal practice to be exemplary of Audre Lorde's advocacy

for teaching by “living and speaking those truths,” which one “believe[s] and know[s] beyond understanding. Because in this way alone [one] can survive, by taking part in a process of life that is creative and continuing, that is growth” (43). One component is incomplete without the other. For instance, Kahf explicitly explains her relationship to the veil: “It is like a second skin to me. It is supple as a living membrane and moves and flows with me. There is beauty and dignity in its fall and sweep. It is my crown and my mantle, my vestments of grace. Its pleasures are known to me, if not to you” (“From Her Royal Body” 27). Clearly, she addresses non-Muslim audiences as well as Muslims who are against the veil. This rightfully loud tone of showing the aestheticism of the veil (rather than either praising or demonizing it) directs Kahf’s fictional, non-fiction, and poetic writings.¹¹ Though Kahf elaborates on the beauty of the veil, she argues that it is not the “best part of being a Muslim woman.” Mohja Kahf defines herself as a Muslim, a feminist, a diasporic figure, an American, an Arab, and an Arab American.

Critical Overview of *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*’s Plot

The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf, set in Middle America in the 1970s, is a novel about the lives of Muslims in the US. It is a bildungsroman in which the growth of the female protagonist, Syrian American Muslim Khadra, aims to teach other Muslim American women to question the various power structures that collaboratively manufacture dominant perceptions of their body. Khadra’s parents, accurately described in Purnima Bose’s review as “sincere, mission-minded,” (90) move to the US to help spread Islam. They work at an Islamic institution in Indiana called the Dawah Center. The word *dawah*, daw‘a, means an invitation or a call for something, so the Dawah Center is a center that calls for Islam; it raises awareness to Islam. The narrative situates

the gender issues in a broad socio-economic and historical context. While the chapters of the novel have no titles, the epigraph with which each chapter begins illuminates its subject. Kahf's allusions to a number of Eastern and Western authors who belong to more than one culture reflect a rejection of cultural chauvinism.¹² The novel opens with Khadra labeling a highway sign in Indiana, "The People of Indiana Welcome You" as a "liar" (1). This sets the tone for the sharp critique of the US anti-Arab racism that it unfolds. It ends with the narrator describing how the female protagonist has developed a sense of "pure surrender," for accepting every difference (441). Acceptance of others is *The Girl in Tangerine Scarf's* main message.

The novel illustrates how Orientalist and Islamist powers over the Muslim female body get constructed by a number of intersecting apparatuses. One of Kahf's many artistic merits is her honesty in presenting an accurate view of the lives of Muslims in America by courageously revealing the huge differences, fissures, and conflicts among them, which explains how some Muslims internalize Orientalist thoughts. She does so without an attempt to idealize or demonize Muslims.¹³ Significantly, Kahf shows the overlap of Orientalist and Islamist body discourses.

Khadra, the female protagonist, engages in different manners of dressing, which reflects the intersecting powers of Orientalism and Islamism. Khadra passes through three linear phases of her understanding of Islam symbolized by her dressing. The powers to which Khadra is exposed, in fact, produce her resistance. The resolution she reaches at the end of the novel does not happen in the absence of power; it happens because of power. In phase one, Khadra readily accepts institutionalized Islamist discourses. Such a stage reaches its peak after Khadra's parents, her father Wajdy and

her mother Ebtelahaj, get American citizenship, when she is sixteen years old. This process is followed by her adoption of a black veil and a black dress. I view this transformation as a counterhegemonic strategy through which Khadra attempts to defend her “Muslimness” against her “Americanness.”¹⁴ Such a newly acquired dress code begins her adoption of Islamism; she decides to live a politically active Islamic life.¹⁵ Loudly, she announces, “Islam is action in the world” (150). The heroine’s developing clothing identity reflects her progressive understanding of Islamist and Orientalist identities.

When Khadra realizes the failure of Islamist doctrines to satisfy her as a Muslim woman, she begins the second stage by recognizing that insistence on gender binaries is not exclusive to Islamism; it is also dominant among secular Muslims who seek to preserve traditions.¹⁶ She changes to a light-colored veil. In this phase, she adopts a “neoclassical” approach to Islam, in which she is determined to acquire knowledge about Islam from classical books. To put it in a Foucauldian manner, Khadra becomes critical of the Dawah Center’s Islamist production of body knowledge. She seeks to gain awareness in a way that does not present immanent realities as representatives of truth. Based on her father’s advice, she searches for this understanding through the help of a male Islamic scholar, a visiting Mauritanian Sheikh. Disappointed at how the Sheikh fails to acknowledge Islamist patriarchy, by being deaf and silent toward the Dawa Center’s disallowing Muslim women to participate in *Quranic* contests, Khadra decides that the traditional way of seeking Islamic knowledge does not suit her. Kahf’s heroine begins to learn the truths of Islam at the hands of a non-Muslim scholar, Eschenbach, a German Professor of Islamic studies, who exemplifies Edward Said’s

first definition of Orientalism: “Anyone who teaches, writes about, or researches the Orient—and this applies whether the person is an anthropologist, sociologist, historian, or philologist—either in its specific or general aspects, is an Orientalist, and what he or she does is Orientalism” (2). Khadra learns that there is not one Islam but many; the Islam she has been “fed” at the Dawah Center is one type. Such an illumination enables her to see a broader context of Islam. Most significantly, the Orientalist scholar opens Khadra’s eyes to the fact that Islam encourages individualism, and that it is only through the knowledge and the love of the self that one may understand the multiple truths about one’s belief system as well as one’s body. Phase two is marked by Khadra’s light clothing, indicating her progressive understanding of Islam.

My qualification of the narrative here as smart is for two reasons: Kahf delivers the message that not all Orientalists are bad, and yet she does not let her heroine be *completely* educated by an Orientalist. The form of the story exemplifies what Wail Hassan describes as “foreignizing” and “domesticating” (37). The former category refers to narratives that refuse to operate within the dichotomy self/ other, or East/West, and the latter discusses accounts that operate within such contrasts.¹⁷ Hassan rightly observes overlaps between the two descriptions. Though *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* works within these binaries, it seeks to consistently redefine the boundaries between them and to show where they intersect and how the presence of one affects the dynamics of the other. This means that Kahf writes back to Orientalism, but not in a reactive way.

In phase three, Khadra has to go home, to Syria, before the circle of her knowledge becomes complete. Her acquired knowledge (based on her resistance to the

manifest discourse of Islamist power, while still adhering to Islam), is tested by US Orientalism. She is finally able to question some rigorous religious ideologies, by which she has always been interpellated. It is at this point that Khadra begins to realize that veiling, unveiling, and revealing are not contradictory modes but rather complementary ones.

While this third phase completes the cycle, I note that Kahf's ways of demythologizing Islamist powers over the Muslim female body are less than perfect. The novel's strategies for debunking such mythologies may, in fact, end up confirming two interrelated issues it seeks to critique: singularity and patriarchy. For example, the narrative's handling of Khadra's revelatory journey to her home is rather "amateurish." Although Khadra has never been home before, the idea of having to go home suddenly drives the plot. I wonder whether this decontextualized shift in the storyline is caused by a conscious or unconscious authorial desire to satisfy what I observe as a trend of home-coming plots in Arab American literature today. This course of events might lead the reader to think that such resistance to ideologies cannot happen within a diasporic frame, i.e., it denotes that those who cannot go home might be obstructed from resistance. The novel's methods of deconstructing mythologies need to be discussed.

Yet, to its merit, the home to which Kahf's protagonist goes is not one thing but rather many. This goes in harmony with the poststructuralist philosophy of the novel. The socio-political home is presented to Khadra through the discourse of her grandmother, who provides her with a historical account of how Syrian women were obliged to take off the veil whether they were in Syria or abroad at some point in history. The grandmother assures Khadra that embracing one's individual identity is a

huge plus. Thus, she confirms the “lesson” that the German “Orientalist” teacher has taught Khadra: “Ego is not the same as ego-monster. You must nurture and guide your ego with care. You must never neglect it. To be unaware of it, how is it working underneath everything you do, to think of yourself as floating high above the normal level of humanity, selfless and pure—why, that is what gets you in the greatest danger” (270). Embracing the self is good.

Yet the very method in which Khadra continues to learn how to love the self and accept different veiling modes is not devoid of problems. In Syria, Khadra meets an Arab male poet, who causes a significant change in her perception of her own body. Firouzeh Ameri describes this poet as “a mysterious figure . . . who may be—it remains unclear in the text—a real person or a figment of her imagination” (183). I see the character of the poet as a symbol of mysticism, spirituality, and Sufism. He helps Khadra love and appreciate her body and also stop seeing it as a source of shame. However, the way in which he aids her resistance to prevalent norms associated with the veil is itself a hierarchical power. I note a lack of discourse (discussion or communication) between the poet and the heroine. From a patriarchal, satirical, and arrogant position, he criticizes Khadra’s perception of her body, informing her of how she should conceive of it. After their meeting, Khadra decides to not put on the veil all the time. She prefers the rhythm of veiling, unveiling, and reveiling. Part of why I am unhappy about how this healthy change happens is that the poet acts as a sovereign power. He is a mythical figure. The reader knows very little about him, not even his name. His beliefs are not tested by the realities of readers, who remain ignorant of how he might react regarding the pressure of several institutions, to which Khadra has been

exposed. To put it differently, he strikes me as apolitical and ahistorical, an emissary of an all-inclusive male power. I am not saying that he has not been interpellated by any ideologies or that he himself might not be the product of ideologies; rather, I am critical of the absence of these details in the novel. Also, while I endorse Kahf's project of using difference as a resource, veiling and unveiling as complementary modes of dress, I argue that her implied choice of Sufism as the one type of Islam that does women justice fails her cause, for it ends up affirming homogeneity. What this exclusion of possibilities implies is that resistance may happen outside, not within the realm of power, which does not help diasporic figures overcome the many powers, to which they are exposed. Patriarchy and sexism still hold true.

Islamist Institution and the Body

In *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, the Dawah Center is an institution that signifies a metaphor for Islamist discourses on Arab American Muslim female body. This center both shapes and is shaped by several personal and political apparatuses. It mandates that its attendants (males and females) dress in a certain way, and it orders the parents to accompany the youth during all the meetings to monitor male-female interactions. This community maintains a policing and surveillance power.

Desiring to preserve Islamic identity in diaspora, the institution promotes rhetoric of separatism and binarism. It offers a counter-hegemonic power, which seeks to oppose mainstream American culture, reminding Muslim families that they have to maintain their difference. It does not concern itself with teaching how to embrace both American and Islamic identities. Additionally, it produces a discourse that reduces the

US to the concepts of secularism and capitalism. In short, one of the duties of the Dawah Center is “to find solutions to the ways in which living in a kuffar [infidel] land made practicing Islam hard” (14). This Islamic association is a symbol of prohibitive Islamist writing on the Muslim female body.

The policing power of the Dawah Center extends to Islamic meetings that take place outside its walls. For instance, at the gathering of the Muslim Students Association, MSA, the heroine’s older brother, Khadra’s brother, Eyad, and his male friends judge her public reading of the *Quran* not only as sexy, but also as *awra*, ‘awra, a shameful act. Eyad tells Khadra that her voice, which the narrative describes as purposefully professional, “turned [them] on” (204). He advises her to quit reciting the *Quran* in gender-mixed meetings, expecting her to agree with him that it is *natural* for her voice to be perceived as erotic. Such is an example of how Muslim male youth are interpellated by the Dawah Center’s patriarchal Islamist mythologies. This means that the power of the Dawa Center extends beyond its borders.

Moreover, through disseminating ideologies, Muslim families internalize the community center’s laws about personal freedom, mobility, agency, and space. In the same manner, Muslim women employ the same investigative authority; they tend to see unveiled women in the community as less valuable, and so they consistently attempt to make them cover their hair. For example, Khadra’s mother, as well as, other women at the Dawah center police Trish, an activist convert to Islam, in an attempt to ““perfect [her] Islam”” (42) by asking her to put on the veil. Here, it might be worth reiterating that such laws do not apply to both genders equally. Muslim women have the lion’s share of gender injustice.

It is a fact that patriarchy and sexism are not inherent in Islam.¹⁸ However, while I congratulate Kahf on demythologizing this dominant signification, I am, again, critical of the manner in which she has her female protagonist resist this manufactured power. Feeling “disgust[ed]” by this mythology of sexed bodies, Khadra stops attending the MSA’s meetings altogether (204). Such a reaction implies that one may not resist Islamist powers while belonging to an Islamic institution. What is good, though, is that the progressive Islam that the center develops toward the end of the novel mitigates the bleakness of this picture.

To her credit, Kahf’s portrayal of an insider’s view of flirtations at the Dawah Center is a humane response to Orientalists’ and Islamists’ inhumane and reductionist claims regarding gender-mixed meetings in Islamic communities. She decodes different ways in which the Muslim youth of the Dawah Center combine both modest and flirtatious gazes. The reader is informed that the more tightly the girl’s hijab is, the lower the boy’s gaze is, and the more they are attracted to one another. The narrator explains this “Muslim modesty dance,” as a combination of both modesty and admiration (182):

Having a male gaze lowered before you said, You are a Woman to me, with a capital W. . . . [the woman’s] gaze lowered too, and her eyelashes lay down on her flushed cheeks. Or she may on purpose roughen her voice and find some important Islamic point to make . . . in the next round, she may lower her hemline even more, and tighten her headscarf, and make her hijab stricter . . . she has found someone worth being the queen of modesty for. . . . Watch out then. Danger, sexy danger, Muslim flirtation-via-modesty-games danger, was in the air. (182-183)

The interrelatedness of modesty and sexuality here invites readers to reevaluate the reductionism of both Islamist and Orientalist discourses. Kahf’s insider’s perspective details these human qualities. The veil is a multi-faced item here.

There is overlap between Islamic centers and marriage. Khadra's husband (Juma), a Kuwaiti graduate student who studies in the US on a student visa, has not been trained by the Dawah Center's Islamic school of thought and yet his "traditional" Islamic training in Kuwait seems to construct similar notions about the Muslim female body.¹⁹ Here, it is worth pointing out that Juma is described as less religious than Khadra at the beginning of the novel. For example, he is critical of what, for him, constitutes a too conservative way of dressing. Nevertheless, he, not surprisingly, adheres to Islamist patriarchy because, obviously, it is convenient for him. Both Juma and Khadra are virgins at the time of marriage. And they are unable to practice sex when they first get married, because they feel that they are being watched by the community. Only after they get rid of their constant consciousness of the community and become used to each other's bodies do they develop a healthy sexual life.²⁰ This means that the community's policing of sex extends to the marriage institution. However, the novel's elaborate discussion of sexuality within Islamic marriages disrupts dominant Orientalist and Islamist discourses on "proper" Muslim sexuality.²¹

The hardships Khadra goes through in her marriage open her eyes to the discrepancy between the egalitarianism that Islam promotes and the injustices that patriarchal Muslims practice. In other words, the power of male-controlled marriages, which seeks to completely contain her, ends up producing her desire for resistance. Throughout her marriage, Khadra has been trying to reconcile what the *Quran* and the *hadith* (the recorded sayings of prophet Mohamed) say about this union, and what her husband, who claims to be "practicing" Islam, actually does. Kahf does not make the heroine a victim of an arranged marriage.²²

In fact, Khadra and Juma get married for equally pragmatic reasons. For while Juma sees in Khadra a suitable future wife, based on her religiosity, she marries him to be able to pursue her education, because her family moves to another town and they do not allow her to live by herself—partially, thanks to the tenets of the Dawah Center’s preaching. Khadra’s pragmatism is made clear when her grandmother asks her about the reason why she wants to marry Juma. Khadra can explain why she wants to marry in general, but she fails to find any convincing reasons for why she wants to marry Juma in particular. Khadra tells her grandmother, “‘he’s as good as any other guy I’d end up marrying, so why not?’” (208) She also finds him exotic. For instance, she senses a “scent of sandalwood” on him (201). But Kahf does not make this situation tragic. After all, Khadra and Juma are physically attracted to one another. The institution of Islamic marriage in the novel does not produce a victim narrative.

Kahf is critical of the dominant perception of Islamic marriages as transformational powers that change the position of women from subject to object. In a Foucauldian fashion, Khadra must be completely obedient to the power that Juma exercises; he views his authority as purely repressive. The novel proves this assumption wrong provided that the wife (the female subject) realizes that there is always room for resistance. Specifically, the divorce takes place because Khadra realizes that Juma assumes that he possesses her body, and that is why he feels it is his right to limit her mobility and her position in public space.²³

Juma forbids Khadra to ride a bike. For him, riding a bike represents a sexy act. Confusing the “signifier,” to use Roland Barthes’ term, by describing biking as sexy while deliberately keeping the “object,” the bike riding sport, without any description,

Juma finds it surprising that being a good Muslim as Khadra claims to be, she does not see her behavior as problematic.²⁴ The narrator tells the readers that Juma “looked puzzled. [Khadra] was an Arab girl, familiar with Arab customs. He hadn’t expected her to be doing things that embarrassed him” (227). Male-controlled views of Islamic marriages contribute to the building of “commonsensical” body mythologies.

In order to discipline his wife’s body, Juma exercises his power yet further. For example, he leaves the house for some days without telling Khadra where he is going; he abstains from having sex with her; he verbally abuses her; and he explicitly commands her to submit to his ownership of her body. In this regard, he says: ““As your husband, I forbid you [to continue to ride bikes]”” (230). His power becomes more evident when Khadra gets pregnant. Being a full-time student, she chooses to postpone pregnancy for a while, and so after she unintentionally gets pregnant, she seeks abortion. Juma insists on preventing her from doing that. He cannot imagine leaving her in the US to pursue her education when he chooses to go back to Kuwait rather than apply for American citizenship. He wonders how he could possibly: ““Leave [his] wife in America?”” (243).

Khadra gets a divorce. She decides to deal with the accusations of the community and the blame of her parents,²⁵ who view divorce as a shameful act and hold women responsible for it, as opposed to losing her self-respect. After the divorce, the readers are informed that the “Dawah Center poster girl had fallen” (251). Khadra announces, “I don’t think I can stay with Juma without changing who I am. Who I essentially deep-down am” (243). On the bright side, Khadra’s insistence on her right to end her pregnancy makes her family and acquaintances eventually give in to her wish.

Thus, she manages to challenge what her parents and the Muslim community in Indianapolis view as established social norms. Khadra makes it clear that she is the only one who has the right to decide what to do with her body. This is a punch in the face of old familial and communal Islamist traditions.

By terminating the marriage, Khadra resists patriarchal power in a way that suits her socio-political context. It is worth clarifying that this female protagonist's method of resistance may be unattainable to women in different positions. In any case, within this specific context, her resistance to the ideological apparatus of marriage disrupts the power circuit. However, in a different situation, Khadra's fight can be seen as flight.

Focusing on the specific details of the practice of *hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca), Kahf criticizes patriarchal ideologies that originate in Islamist discourses, yet she does so without affirming the Orientalist assumptions that the patriarchy of the Saudi culture is inherent in Islam.²⁶ Kahf seems to agree with Meriam Cooke that, unlike the dominant Western perception of *hajj* as a site for gender discrimination, *hajj* can be a manifestation of gender equality at large and of body egalitarianism in particular. Distinguishing between *hajj* as a concept and as a signification, Kahf makes it clear that the patriarchal Islamist laws produced by Saudi Arabia fabricate mythologies that are different from the productive bodily practices emphasized by the *Quran*. For example, Kahf sees the religious physical performances of *hajj*, including uniform dressing and abstaining from sex as productive elements. She shows that what is destructive, however, is how male-programmed cultures manufacture a "commonsensical" perception of women pilgrims as second class citizens. I find Kahf's implied argument here similar to Bordo's statement that dietary and exercise rituals are not bad

themselves; they make the (female) body stronger provided that society does not use these practices as *the* definition of that body. Both authors agree that it is culture, not nature, that defines the “normal” female body.²⁷ Kahf’s critique of culturally constituted body practices during pilgrimage challenges both Orientalism and Islamism.

In the same vein, the novel critiques the power of the *matwaa*, religious police in Saudi Arabia, which produces a general perception of women as sexualized bodies that need protection. For instance, Khadra’s desire to practice her right to pray at a mosque is prevented by the *matwaa*, *muṭawwi’*, (policeman), who sees this act as violation of Islam. He takes her home forcefully and reproaches her *mehrem* (male guardian, father) for letting his *harem* wander the streets. The *matwaa* does not listen to what Khadra tells him about her rights in Islam. For example, she tells him that according to the Islamic knowledge she has acquired from the *Quran* and the *hadith*, a husband cannot prevent his wife from going to the mosque, let alone a male stranger, the *matwaa*. Yet, he is deaf to this. Khadra complains that he laughs at her, and arrogantly says, ““listen to this woman quoting scriptures at us”” (168). The *matwaa*’s description of Khadra as an immoral woman is part of a state mythology.

I find this to be a good example of how habitus works as Pierre Bourdieu informs us: “One of the fundamental effects of the orchestration of habitus is the production of a commonsense world endowed with the objectivity secured by consensus on the meaning (sens) of practices” (80). What is perceived by Muslims as a holy thing in the US is seen as a disgrace in Saudi Arabia. This is another moment when Khadra learns that she has to be critical of particular Islamist discourses and to listen to her internal/ individual interpretation of Islam. Affected by the *matwaa*’s reproach of the

Saudi Arabian family that hosts Khadra and her family, her father automatically condemns her behavior—though he sees no problem with it in the US. Likewise, influenced by the female host’s negative opinion regarding mixed-gender meetings, Khadra’s mother denies that the Dawah Center organizes similar gatherings and pretends that she has never seen such a thing. The father worries about his manly image, and the mother acts from a belief that the Islam of Arab countries is necessarily better. They two are carriers of established state mythologies. They want to avoid public shame.²⁸

Kahf asserts that the most sacred place from an Islamic perspective does not transcend the level of the corporeal realities of human bodies, especially the female body.²⁹ During hajj season, Khadra observes two seemingly different actions: (1) men sometimes, perhaps by mistake, touch women while doing *ṭawwāf* (moving around *ka’ba*—the Noble Cube); (2) they surround their women to protect them from strangers. Describing a scene in which Muslim women are portrayed as fragile objects that need protection, Khadra sees a “wall of [array of] Arab Gulf men stormed through, elbows locked around their women kin. They shoved everyone aside, barking ‘We have womenfolk, make way for them! We have women!’” Given the unfamiliarity of this behavior, Khadra wonders: “‘What are we, chopped liver?’” (162-163). The novel’s revelation of how sexual assaults contaminate the supposedly pure spirituality creates a shock effect, which invites its readers, especially Muslims, to reconsider their unquestioned beliefs in the transparency of this Islamist state’s discourse on the body of women.

However, Saudi Arabian Islamist discourse is not totally repressive; it produces not only its followers, but also its deviants. Ironically, Saudi Arabia is the locale where the female protagonist's body is dishonored the most. Khadra's host, female cousin, Afaf, takes her out with a group of her friends, mostly males. Khadra is astonished to learn that they consume drugs; have sex outside the institution of marriage; and drink alcohol. They see her as an American and so it makes sense to them that she would consent to having sex and drinking. Khadra's judicious wearing of the veil is nonsensical to them. For instance, Ghazi, one of her cousin's male friends, shouts, "Surely you don't wear that thing in America" (177). Also, comforted in the fact that "[n]o one can see [them]," he sexually assaults her. He "was pulling the veil down the back of her head and pushing his other hand up against her breasts and his mouth was grazing her now exposed neck. She was squeezed up against the car door, and then he was pushing himself on top of her, his jeaned thighs taut . . . what is it—what is the big deal—we're not doing anything you have to worry about [you won't lose your virginity]" (177-178). The discrepancy between what Khadra has been taught about the purity of Islam in Saudi Arabia and what she experiences there is appalling. She does not feel at home in the supposed "home" for Muslims and cannot wait to go back to her real "home," the US (179). Kahf successfully debunks the dominant assumption that Arab countries are "more Muslim" than non-Arabs. The Muslim female body is not protected anywhere.

Orientalist Institutions and Racism

Before delving into *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf's* discussion of Orientalism, it is worth elucidating that to its credit the novel analyzes racism among Muslims, a

topic which is often avoided by Muslim writers. Such racism plays a significant role in the fabrication of the Muslim female body. Adhering to racist ideologies, some Muslims make their marriage choices based on the skin color of their potential future spouses. They do not tolerate interracial marriages. Like other racists, Arab and Arab American Muslim racists view black skin as a sign of inferior identity. For example, Khadra's mother does not allow her to braid her hair in a fashion similar to Tayiba Thoreau's, who is partially Kenyan. Similarly, Khadra's brother, Eyad, listens to his parents' prejudiced objections to his desire to marry black Muslim woman Maha. For instance, the father says, "she's black as coal" (139). Again, Kahf hints that this xenophobic power on the body can still be resisted, for toward the end of the novel Khadra develops a relationship with a black Muslim man, Hakim, whom she has not considered for marriage before because she has been carrier of racist ideologies. One should give her body a chance to reconnect outside established racial boundaries.

The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf examines Edward Said's second definition of Orientalism, a "style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident'" (2). Particularly, the novel focuses on anti-Arab racism in the US.³⁰ As a number of Arab American critics have argued,³¹ this racism is mainly shaped not by ontological reasons, but by epistemological ones; it originates less in the biological ethnicity of the Arabs and more in the cultural and political practices of their Islamic culture, which includes both Muslim and non-Muslim Arabs in the US. As noted in the introduction, critics have correctly argued that the 9/ 11 attacks have fueled, not started, the harsh criticism that is directed against Arabs in the US, and that this new racial era has affected Arab

American literatures. Orientalist discourse holds a threatening array of stereotypes and myths against “Orientals” now as well as in the past.

The novel attempts to attack the Orientalist gaze on Muslims. It also asserts that both Orientalism and nationalism lead to Occidentalism. It seeks to disrupt the general assumption that Islam belongs to the Orient and is not part of the American fabric. It portrays a general mood of racism and bigotry against Muslims in Indiana, where they are exposed to direct threats and hateful remarks. For example, the Dawah Center gets much of the racists’ attention. However, Kahf does not grant anti-Arab racism permanence in her novel. Just as *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* reveals real moments of racism, it discusses many examples of peace and inclusiveness, in which some characters are able to go beyond racist identity politics. Kahf does an honest job in delineating the heterogeneity and thus the humanity of American society at large.

Mainstream American schools present an example of Orientalist discourses in *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*.³² Khadra’s Islamic identity, clear in her wearing the veil, makes her an easy prey for “Othering” so much so at school, her “job was to get through the day dodging verbal blows—and sometimes physical ones” (123).³³ Khadra cannot even “write back” to this discourse; for example, her critical essay on US politics is not at all appreciated by her English composition teacher. Moreover, her schoolmates force her to remove the headscarf. Thinking that she should be fine with him pulling off her headscarf, one of them tells her “take off your towel Look, raghead’s got hair under that piece a shit It’s just hair, you psycho” (124). Not being able to express her anger, Khadra becomes aggressive. Neither school nor family is able to understand the source of her anger. Her teacher does not get why she keeps

telling her classmates, “I hate you.” For fear that her parents might blame this moment of racism on her playing with boys, Khadra chooses to be silent. Orientalism threatens to annihilate a significant part of Khadra’s being, her voice.

Mainstream American media, another outlet for anti-Arab racism, attempts to use Khadra as a tool to objectify Muslim bodies but in vain. Working as a journalist in “Alternative America,” Khadra experiences racial discrimination at firsthand. Although her boss attempts to convince her to take pictures of Muslims at the Dawah Center, assuring her that she will “have creative control . . . [because she is] the one behind the lens” (49), Khadra chooses to not participate in producing this colonial gaze. Moreover, she opts to not represent Muslims at all yet finally agrees to take pictures of them provided that her depictions are not clichés. She refuses to let her images answer the dominant Orientalist question about the position of Muslims bodies while praying. Instead, she drafts her own query: “what does the world look like from inside this prayer?” (54) Khadra deals with this issue in a way that shows individual differences among Muslims. This specificity fights the sameness that the Orientalist colonial gaze, à la Malek Alloula,³⁴ maintains. In an interview on NPR of the same year *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* was published, Kahf complained about the dominant image of Muslim prayers’ “butts in the air,” and so she was determined to “take a different look at that posture [of praying],” which she sees as “really an embrace of the earth; it is very grounding.” Kahf’s critique of the objectification of Muslim bodies is not just a “strife” for gender justice, as Kahf refers to it, but also for race justice. These are two sides of the same coin.

The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf points out that Orientalist (and nationalist) discourses on the “Muslim female body” lead to a mean-spirited Occidental discourse on the non-Muslim female body. The novel does not entertain Said’s first definition of Orientalism--“Anyone who teaches, writes about, or researches the Orient” (2). It can be argued that the novel specifies which particular Orientalist discourses are problematic and which ones may help achieve the liberation of Muslim women. Arab American Muslim families and communities in the novel see the American body as filthy and consuming. Based on a number of bodily-associated activities, such as eating, having extramarital sex, and drinking, American women are inferiorized. They are viewed as a metaphor for a consumer culture. The underlying assumption is that cleanliness is exclusive to Muslims. For instance, Khadra’s mother:

always ran the laundry twice in the Fallen Timbers basement laundry room with the coin machines. Because what if the person who used the washer before you had a dog? You never knew with Americans. Pee, poop, vomit, dog spit, and beer were impurities. Americans didn’t care about impurities. . . . How Americans tolerate living in such filth is beyond me, her mother said. (4)

Also, she is convinced that ““Their bodies forget how to pray after sitting up stiffly at tables and desks, working to gain the wealth and glitter of this world”” (34). Just as the veil is often perceived as a political statement against American mainstream culture, absence of the veil among non-Muslim women is viewed in the novel as a threat to Islamist powers, a political account that affirms their minority. For example, on the plane to Mecca (to perform *hajj*), Khadra and her family experience vengeful joy that non-Muslim women on the plane have to dress modestly so as to observe the norm on the plane. Exercising power over the now minority women, Khadra congratulates

herself for being majority.³⁵ Occidentalism is closely related to Orientalism. Western and non-Western women are victims of these racial modes.

The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf is not less critical of how some Muslims internalize an Orientalist point of view toward the Muslim female body. Kahf does not have her female protagonist give in to her Arab American Muslim co-worker Chrif Benzind's Islamophobia. Khadra questions Chrif's black-and-white attitudes, which reduce Islam to one thing: institutionalized Islam. Chrif's demonization of Islam is the antithesis of Khadra's parents' idealization of it. These two groups operate through a monolithic perception. More maturely, expressing her in-betweenness, Khadra says, "I'm too religious for the secular men, and too lax for the religious ones" (354). Khadra, rightly so, sees Chrif's inability to understand why she chooses to not have sex with him to be a replica of, though seemingly in opposition to, institutionalized Islam. Both parties insist on a one-dimensional interpretation of Islam and dictate how a Muslim woman should perceive her body. These are different masks yet same faces. Kahf makes it clear that she is critical of all kinds of Orientalism and racism.

Plural Politics of the Veil

The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf's statement on the veil is difficult to pin down. By centralizing the hot topic of the veil, and by taking on its shoulder the responsibility to delineate the veil's multiple valences, *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* puts to work what Amira Jarmakani describes as the "hypervisibility" of Muslim women post-9/11.³⁶ The novel's female characters are not what Evelyn Alsultany qualifies as "stealth Muslims," Muslims who hide their Islamic identities for fear of being attacked or

misunderstood.³⁷ On the contrary, the characters in *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* show their “Muslimness.”

Kahf neither demonizes nor idealizes the veil.³⁸ Khadra, not unlike her Muslim friends in the Islamic community, is not forced to wear the veil by her family. That is not to say that the female characters are not surrounded by multiple dominant ideologies that “convince” them that they need to protect the privacy of their bodies by adopting the veil—*pas du tout*. Though Khadra’s parents do not directly force hijab on her, everything around Khadra makes adopting hijab commonsensical. This includes the missionary minds of the parents; their reverence for the community’s judgment of them; and the influential role that the Islamic community in Indiana plays in the life of Muslim diasporic figures. They take her on a trip to a different city where she may purchase expensive and beautiful hijabs. The father explains to her that she needs to buy fabric that is both rich and comfortable. This denotes that she does not have to sacrifice the comfort of her body; she does not need to choose between the Islamic appearance she adopts and a classy look. The father, who is good at sewing, personalizes the fancy hijabs that Khadra has purchased. Describing the moment Khadra puts on hijab for the first time, the narrator informs the reader:

The sensation of being hijabed was a thrill. Khadra had acquired vestments of a higher order. Hijab was a crown on her head. She went forth lightly and went forth heavily into the world, carrying the weight of a new grace. Even though it went off and on at the door several times a day, hung on a hook marking the threshold between inner and outer worlds, hijab soon grew to feel as natural to her as a second skin, without which if she ventured into the outside world she felt naked. (112-113)

This description of hijab is hard to classify. On the one hand, it is a “crown,” a decoration, or an addition. On the other hand, it is often in the novel an “unbearable

weight.” While Kahf invites readers to reach their own conclusion regarding the significance of the veil in relation to a Muslim woman’s agency, the authorial voice imposes a nuanced judgment of the veil. It would be naïve to think that Khadra’s family’s “decision” in regard to the veil is independent of a whole set of Islamic education.

Here I want to argue that the veil as manifested in *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* reflects a model for female agency that is larger than a way of resistance; it is an act of agency. For while the heroine, similar to the author, celebrates the beauty as well as the significance of the veil, she rejects being defined by it. I observe that this critical position exemplifies sociocultural anthropologist Saba Mahmood’s description of agency as a call for action rather than a means for resistance. In what seems to me to be a Foucauldian manner, Mahmood questions the usual suppositions of “transcendental subject, voluntarism, and repressive models of power” (“Feminist Theory” 118). Mahmood is critical of the misguided application of Western feminists’ definition of agency “that seeks to locate the political and moral autonomy of the subject in the face of power” (111). Explaining her critique of the dominant Western feminist model, she argues:

this model of agency sharply limits our ability to understand and interrogate the lives of women whose sense of self, aspirations, and projects have been shaped by nonliberal traditions. . . . I want to suggest that we think of agency not as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination but as a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create.³⁹ (112)

Mahmood insists that feminist approaches need to take into account the specific historical, geographical, sociopolitical, and religious contexts in order for them to help

liberate women. In this context, Kahf's endorsement of the veil (for women who *choose* to wear it) is a powerful feminist intervention.

Indeed, *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* represents the hijab as a means for reconnection not only to other Muslim women from various ethnicities, but also to one's family and community. For instance, the narrator says, "Khadra loves being in this forest of women in hijab, their khimars and saris and jilbabs and thobes and depattas [different ethnic veil styles] fluttering and sweeping the floor and reaching out to everything. Compact Western clothing doesn't rustle, or float, or reach out to anything" (55). The veil constitutes an act of agency that bonds heterogeneous Muslim women.

Through embracing heterogeneity, *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* demonstrates that hijab is plural.⁴⁰ This is a practical response to the many dominant Orientalist discourses which perceive the veil as a singular thing. One way in which Kahf does so is through highlighting the relationship between a veiled woman's social class and her hijab style. I assert that addressing this subject has a dual function: it explains the differences within the veil culture, and it also critiques the elitism and the separatism that exist among Muslim women, but is not often talked about. This is an example of how Kahf criticizes Orientalists and Muslims, not just Islamists, for using the veil to justify their being racist and classist. In other words, Kahf is critical of Othering and reifying the veil, which is typical for Orientalists, and of using it as a means to show off, characteristic of classist Muslims. Kahf takes it on her shoulder to reveal it all conscientiously.

The multiple realities of the veil—which, as established earlier, Kahf is committed to demystifying—prove that the veil culture is not saved from the effect of capitalism, consumerism, and fashion trends. For example, the novel exposes how the Dawah Center girls “Other” Tayiba—an African American girl who has been raised in Chicago and who belongs to a high social class and puts on a stylish hijab as such: “Tayiba was mod. They had never seen a mod Muslim girl before. She wore platform shoes with holes through the heels, bell-bottom jeans, a breezy peasant blouse and large sunglasses that rested atop her hijab—a jaunty little kerchief tied at the side of her head. A hijab with a side tie?” (27) For another example, the pretentiousness and shallowness of Omayma Hayyan, the wife of Khadra’s brother,⁴¹ Eyad, “daughter of an Iraqi colon specialist,” who is described as “slender, pretty, and expensive” (253) provides one of many instances that veiled women are not immune to consumer capitalism and its style hierarchies. Capitalist body values hold true in the world of veiled women.

Here I want to note that Kahf’s standpoint can be productively juxtaposed to Katherine Bullock’s. Bullock argues that “because of capitalism’s emphasis on the body and on materiality, wearing [hijab] can be an empowering and liberating experience for women” (183). Kahf might not readily agree that the veil “is a powerful way to resist the detrimental aspects of [male gaze and capitalism’s commodification of the female body]” (183). Though Bullock, too, sees the varieties of the veil based on the economic status of women (217), she seems to have a more optimistic opinion regarding the veil’s resistance to capitalistic temptations than Kahf does. She grounds her argument in various reasons. For instance, she asserts that the privacy of the veil empowers women

and disrupts the capitalist discourse on women as sex objects. Also, she claims that veiled women are supposed to believe that God has created them in a state of perfection and, as such, they are encouraged to not seek any beauty surgeries. I want to register that I find Kahf's implied argument in *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* more convincing because it is based on more convincing assumptions. (1) A woman's religious identity is not the total definition of who she is. (2) The Islamic dress code does not necessitate specific cutting, fabric, or manufacturing countries; it is supposed to not be tight or see-through. Thus, there is no reason why a veiled woman cannot combine Islamic and universal fashions. (3) In such an all-inclusive capitalistic and imperialistic world, it is impossible to imagine how Muslim women may escape the co-option. A more realistic "compromise" is that the West tailors its market to meet Muslim women's tastes (read: to create more consumers). Such is the case of the Western market in the Gulf countries, for instance. Obviously, this change of taste does not happen for religious reasons, but to fulfil materialistic ones. Kahf has it right in her novel.

I want to end this section with a critique. While I agree with Kahf's portrayal of the heterogeneity of the veil and support her assertion that hijab is not all that describes a Muslim woman's identity, I register my criticism of the implied denial of any sacredness of the veil that Kahf's poststructuralist feminist model of veiling, unveiling, revealing suggests. Arguing that the veil is not a total definition of the Muslim female identity is right and is needed, but to conclude that the veil is or is not essential to a religion is a different point. I take issue with throwing out such an ungrounded overstatement in a literary work without backing it up. Adopting Henry James's famous definition of the novel genre as traditionally realistic, I note that it is not naïve of

readers to expect Kahf's presentations to be realistic. I wonder if the author tries to reach out to non-Muslim readers by this disturbance of the novel's convention. This general weakness, I claim, contradicts a wiser assumption Kahf elaborates in "From Her Royal Body." There Kahf argues: "Conservative Muslim women and men" who view hijab as an "integral part of faith" have the right to practice it and to encourage it but when they force women to wear it, they are repeating the same rhetoric that have long excludes them.⁴² My real fear is enlarged by the fact that the novel has been viewed by some reviewers as representative of Islam. Kahf's poststructuralist interpretation of the veil has good and bad aspects.

Minorities and Myths

Khadra's struggle with Orientalism and Islamism is strengthened by her fellow Dawah Center's attendant, Zuhura. An active member of African Students Association and the Dawah Center, Zuhura represents two minority groups in the US. Due to her race and religion, Zuhura is doubly marginalized. Muslim males in the Dawah Center, particularly her fiancée, criticize her belonging to an African (secular, intermingled gender) association, which singles her out because of her religion, symbolized in her veil: "Zuhura was featured in the college paper for being the first Muslim woman to head the African student organization at IU." The article specifies that she is the "first Muslim woman in hijab" (74). The fact that the only "link" between these two minority groups gets eliminated from the narrative signifies the clash of civilizations. I read Zuhura's death as a metaphor for cultural essentialism and ethnic separatism. "Zuhura's body was found in a ravine near Beanblossom Bridge. Murdered. Raped. Cuts on her hands, her hijab and clothes in shreds" (93). While Islamists argue that her death is for

racist reasons, Orientalists, not surprisingly, view it as an example of women's oppression in Islam. The mainstream media reiterates this binarism by insisting on perceiving her *either* as a “foreign” person *or* as “black” (95). Without any investigation, the American police automatically suspect that Zuhura's (Muslim) fiancé must have killed her, defending his honor. In a tellingly fragmented narrative, the reader is offered a summary of the police's consumption of dominant loaded myths: “Murder Possible Honor Killing—Middle eastern Connection . . . ‘the oppression of women in Islam’” (97). Likewise, Islamists from the Dawah Center think of Zuhura's death as a natural result of her family's allowing her to pursue an education in a different city. In other words, it comes from her independence, freedom, mobility, and individuality. By the death of Zuhura, the symbol of inter-minority groups is questioned and destructive myths are brought into the daylight.

Zuhura represents strong Muslim feminists; she is aware of her rights as a human being, as a woman, an American, and a Muslim. She insists on researching and discussing whatever she is being told, as opposed to readily accepting existing myths. Like Khadra, Zuhura is aware that patriarchy is not inherent in Islam and so she does not hesitate to debunk patriarchal discourses by Muslims and non-Muslims alike.⁴³ The white authorities force Khadra to keep silent during their regular surveillance “zoning” visits to the Dawah Center. Additionally, they find Khadra's willingness to know about their reasons for “visiting” the center to be abnormal; it does not fit their fabricated image of Muslim women. The narrator explains:

While the building inspector was measuring the shutters, she looked over his shoulder and said, “Did you know that zoning law has often been used as a tool to keep people of other races out?” Jotting things on his clipboard, the white

man nodded politely but paid no attention to her. . . . Wajdy [Khadra's father] gently but firmly signaled for her to go back into the house. Zuhura was not accustomed to being brushed aside. She did not have the habits and mein of most of the Indiana black women the building inspector would have come across in his life, or their understanding of the unspoken rules of "getting along" in this place where they lived. She was likely to accost and question you, man or woman, even if you had an air of authority, and she did so with an attitude that assumed her objections would be addressed. (43)

In this case, the white male discourse in the US parallels the "dialogue" of the Saudi *matwaa* with Khadra in Saudi Arabia.

Through the early example of the always-present-both-as-alive-and-as-dead African American Muslim Zuhura, Kahf tells readers that developing practical and meaningful cultural dialogues is a must among Muslims and non-Muslims; the Orient and the Occident; Arabs and non-Arabs as well as various ethnic groups.⁴⁴ Zuhura exemplifies the price that American Muslim women pay for the absence of gender justice, which results from the clash of civilizations and damaging myths. Both Orientalism and Islamism silence Zuhura. They fabricate her body and are responsible for her death. The narrative moves from seeing this dialogue as impossible to celebrating its potentiality. After Zuhura's death, the killer remains unknown for the reader, and Khadra begins to question her own American citizenship and to doubt that she can be both American and Muslim. "Maybe we don't belong here," (97) she worries. Khadra's identity question is deadly serious.

Yet, Khadra's development of a connection with Zuhura, without wanting to know whom Zuhura represents, denotes the possibility of a real cultural dialogue. Khadra's hijab connects her with Zuhura: "her tangerine depatta draped loosely over her shoulder and fluttering over Zuhura's gravestone" (404). Critiquing institutionalized patriarchal Islam and the burden with which it pressures Muslim women in diaspora,

she imagines, “If only they could be reprogrammed, her stalwart army of much-maligned Muslim men, if only they could alter their training manuals a little, to reorient its goals around her actual needs instead of some handed-down script” (353). This is a rebellion against Islamist chains on female bodies.

In this chapter, I have offered institutional and ideological analyses of how Islamism and Orientalism fabricate the Muslim female body as manifested in Syrian American Mohja Kahf’s *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*. I have discussed Kahf’s poststructuralist feminist modes of proactive resistance to dominant body fabrications, pointing out what to me represents the novel’s merits and drawbacks in relation to body mythologies. My discussion aims to contribute to ongoing Body Studies literature. Employing concepts such as Said’s Orientalism, Foucault’s surveillance, Bourdieu’s mythology, and Althusser’s ideology together with existing Arab American feminist scholarship, this chapter offers a further step towards bridging the gap between ethnic American literature and mainstream theory and literature.

Chapter Two

Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent* (2003): Reconfiguring the Spirituality of the Body

While Chapter One offers institutional analyses of Islamist and Orientalist constructions and deconstructions of the Muslim female body as manifested in Syrian American Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, chapter two portrays Jordanian American Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent*'s modes of resistance to Islamic rituals' manufacture of the body. *Crescent*'s thematic statement regarding Orientalist fabrications of the body is brief, yet powerful. By embracing material quotidian details, which one has long been trained to perceive as mundane physical practices, and by granting the body's spirituality through these physical actions only, Abu-Jaber offers a paradigm shift in contemporary Arab American women's literature. Unlike many other Arab American women authors who focus on analyzing the exteriority of the Muslim female body, Abu-Jaber is more interested in the body's interiority. (I do not mean to accept a separation or binarism between the interiority of the body and its exteriority). Abu-Jaber asserts that the body does not have to perform religious rites in order for it to be spiritual. In *Crescent*, she clearly makes the point that spirituality is, in fact, embodied in corporeal activities. She does so by emphasizing that the female body can produce its "resistance weapons" by sharing food, sharing love, and sharing stories.

Crescent shows that spirituality infuses the body although it does not come from a higher power such as religion; it happens from within. The novel's analysis of Islamic

institutional constructions of the body is brief. Little is much. Though its main emphasis lies on the physicality of the body, its quick representation of religious ideologies leads to emptying Islamic bodily practices—such as praying, using prayer beads, fasting, dressing the body in a certain way—of any spiritual meanings. Such a portrayal fills the resulting vacuum with interpersonal physical details.

To put it in the fashion of Saussure, Abu-Jaber does not get rid of the concept (the signified) of the body's need for spirituality. She does, however, replace one form (signifier) with another. In other words, she is critical of the bodily practices which aim to serve religion, yet she is appreciative of relational physical practices, actions that relate one human being to another. While *Crescent* does not deny the body's need for spirituality, it reconfigures the definition and the mechanisms of this spirituality. I think that this critical life strategy can be effective as long as it constantly creates one signifier after another to reveal the ridiculousness of the arbitrary relationship between concepts and forms or signifieds and signifiers. However, when it stops at level one of the replacements of signifiers, it offers too little besides substituting one meaning with another. More on the shortcoming follows. The relationships between the spiritual and the material constituents of the human body that *Crescent* dramatizes challenge institutionalized definitions of spirituality.

In the text, the daily bodily processes reconfigure spirituality. I say reconfigure because, clearly, the apparatuses of institutionalized Islam (similar to other traditional religions) operate from the assumption that disciplining the body through religious rituals leads to spirituality. Also, Islamism (not contrary to orthodox patriarchal interpretations of other religions) assumes that the female body is shameful, and that the

only way to maintain spirituality in society is by erasing it from public space. While I endorse *Crescent's* analysis of spirituality (spirituality is the offspring of bodily deeds), I problematize its portrayal of Islamic bodily practices as sheer cultural artifacts.

Crescent makes the point that religious rituals of the body are mere cultural relics, which serve as cultural connectors. For example, these acts connect diasporic figures with their home. The novel presents such practices with romanticism and nostalgia. At great risk, it negates all possible relationships among religion, spirituality, and the body. Although *Crescent* sees the body and the spirit as inseparable, it views what is religious and what is spiritual as necessarily detachable. This means that it reverses, yet maintains, binarism. Here my ultimate worry comes from the fact that emptying these religious bodily practices from any possible spiritual values and seeing them as mere cultural symbols undermines the field of Islamic feminism. It seems to say that one has to get rid of religious rituals in order to attain spirituality. I am also concerned that this stance feeds Islamophobia, a manifestation of Orientalism. By not distinguishing Islamism, Islam, and Islamic ways of life,¹ *Crescent* runs the risk of confirming Islamists's dominant hallucinations that they *are* Islam.

This chapter follows a trajectory by introducing Diana Abu-Jaber and *Crescent*; assessing the novel's presentation of significant religious bodily practices especially veiling; situating *Crescent's* portrayal of spirituality in a larger context; exploring how *Crescent* presents the theme of sharing love in relation to spirituality; and highlighting the novel's liberatory spiritual view of sexuality.

Introducing the Author and the Novel

Diana Abu-Jaber was born in Syracuse, New York to a Jordanian father, a convert to Islam, and an American Christian mother from an Irish-German background. Different from the rest of the authors, with which this dissertation deals, Abu-Jaber is biracial, and her Arab American identity is not only due to her family's immigration, but also it comes from her dual racial identities. Not unlike many ethnic American writers, Abu-Jaber has had to live the dilemma of belonging to two worlds, in which her (immigrant) father insists that his family maintain an ethnic lifestyle in the host country. Abu-Jaber criticizes her father's insistence on maintaining a pure ethnic identity.² For instance, she informs an interviewer that she has been determined to become liberated as a woman and as an author. She notes: "If you have a parent or parents who came from a very traditional patriarchal society . . . [e]verything is circumscribed, and everything is watched. . . . I feel that for a lot of women of immigrant parents—especially artists, writers, anyone who wants to do anything in any way audacious—it's almost like you have to metaphorically kill the parents" (Field 216).

Abu-Jaber's educational background and writing career include being an associate professor, whose academic interests cover fiction writing, postcolonial literature, first generation writers, and film studies. She received a B.A., an M.A., and a Ph.D. in English and Creative Writing from the State University of New York at Oswego, the University of Windsor, and SUNY in Binghamton respectively. She has taught creative writing and English at UCLA, the University of Oregon, the University of Michigan, and is currently teaching at Portland State University in Oregon. Her first novel, *Arabian Jazz* (1993), won the Oregon Book Award and became a finalist for the

National Pen/ Hemingway Award, and was nominated for the PEN/Faulkner Award. *Arabian Jazz* is about issues of acculturation. Abu-Jaber is also known for her memoir *The Language of Baklava* (2005), and her novel *Origin* (2007), which is a work of science fiction, with no Arab American themes. In addition, she has written a number of essays. Quite evident in Abu-Jaber's writings is a decision to interweave the personal and the cultural. For example, food culture is a significant theme in her latest novel *Birds of Paradise* (2012), as it is in *The Language of Baklava* and *Crescent*. *Birds of Paradise* discusses the interaction of various communities after hurricane Katrina. As critics observe, Abu-Jaber writes about different topics ranging from Arab American race and gender issues to science fiction characteristically transcending the boundaries of one race or one ethnicity.³

Although *Crescent* has received significant attention from Arab American scholars, the subject of spirituality and sexuality in the novel has yet to be studied. Up to this point, critics and reviewers of *Crescent* have focused on issues of identity—namely home, diaspora, the use of folktales, and food—showing the novel's manifestation of a hyphenated identity.⁴ I would like here to highlight some important criticism on *Crescent* to create a context for my reading of it. Steven Salaita praises the different cultural positions Abu-Jaber has carved for herself in the field of Arab American literature. He correctly qualifies her as “one of the preeminent Arab American writers.” Observing the ways in which Abu-Jaber is able to redefine the borders of the Arab American literary community, Salaita says that her “work impels critics to examine not only the uses of ethnic imagery in the category, but the very parameters of the category itself” (*Modern Arab American Fiction* 96). My claim that

Abu-Jaber offers a paradigm shift in the presentation of the subject of the Muslim female body underwrites Salaita's observation regarding the redefinition of the community. However, my research goes in a different direction to scrutinize some gender issues in the novel in relation to Islam and, to a lesser extent, in association with Orientalism.

Crescent is a well-written novel. On the craftsmanship of *Crescent*'s form and content, Salaita says that the novel "acquires a depth of character and philosophy that must exist for a novel to be considered artistically successful" (106). Nouri Gana praises Abu-Jaber's presentation of Arab American politics in ways that do not separate politics from daily life and that do not try to edify readers but rather invites them to think for themselves.⁵ I agree with Gana that Abu-Jaber manages to represent Arab American experience as heterogeneous. I, too, see the novel as far from being polemical. Unlike Gana, however, I observe a single political message beneath the varied topics that the novel discusses. This chapter shows how directive the novel is in shaping Muslim female body politics.

A brief synopsis of *Crescent* and its distinctions is helpful at this point. *Crescent* received the 2004 PEN Center USA Award for Literary Fiction and the Before Columbus Foundation's American Book Award. It was named one of the twenty best novels of 2003 by *The Christian Science Monitor*. While the novel was completed before 9/11/2001, its presentation of politics foreshadows the 9/11 events. It takes place in what the narrative refers to as "Tehranges," a Persian neighborhood in Los Angeles right after the first Persian-Gulf War in the 1980s. The text consists of a main plot and a

sub-plot.⁶ While the former is told mainly by an omniscient narrator, the latter is narrated by the female protagonist's uncle, whose name remains unknown.

The body issues that *Crescent* discusses are mainly represented by its female protagonist Sirine, an Iraqi American, who is perceived to be Muslim by association with her late Arab father, a convert to Islam. Sirine is thirty-nine years old at the beginning of the novel and turns forty-one at its end. She has never married. She works as a chef at an Arabic restaurant called Nadia's Café, which is owned by a Lebanese woman, Um-Nadia (the mother of Nadia). Sirine's parents died when she was young while they were in Africa on a relief-giving mission with the Red Cross. Sirine lives with her paternal uncle, a professor at UCLA. In the narrative, the Arab cultural figure Salah al-Din moves from Aqaba (in Jordan) to Hollywood and is likened to a trickster.⁷ Interweaving love stories; encompassing contemporary political realities; and implementing folkloric tales are themes that have given *Crescent* a tone of both realism and magic realism. Almost all the chapters of the novel are divided into two unequal parts; one deals with the main plot and the other with the subplot. Toward the end of the novel, the two plots overlap, when the male protagonists of both plots, Hanif El-Eyad and Salah al-Din, become closely connected. Sirine falls in love with Hanif El-Eyad (also known as Han, and from now on Han), an exile Iraqi professor of Arabic literature at the Middle Eastern Studies program of UCLA.

Nadia's Café symbolizes a homeland for the Arabs in the neighborhood, who go there to eat Arabic food and to speak Arabic. The café has been described as an "interethnic" locale, where different ethnicities get hybridized.⁸ Food motifs are prevalent in the novel. And several critics have written about how the theme of food

connects Arab characters to their homelands and how it joins Arab American cultures. Beyond the café, the representation of Arab subjects in the media is an important theme in *Crescent*.⁹ In addition, Abu-Jaber's elegant description of the material details in which the characters engage (sharing food, sharing love, and sharing stories), renders her novel movingly romantic. It is hard to pin down *Crescent* to any single interpretation or subgenre.

Religious Bodily Practices: Prayer Beads and Veils

The female protagonist, Sirine, does not find her serenity in institutionalized religious physical practices, but in interpersonal material activities. Sirine's reaction towards Muslim women's meetings at mosques is a dramatic illustration. Although not Muslim herself, Sirine is encouraged by her lover, Han, who has an Islamic background, to attend one of these meetings to learn more about his religious culture. She goes to the group meeting of "Women in Islam" and finds it annoying. The reader is informed that the "longer she stands in the room, the more uncomfortable she feels" (188). Her discomfort comes from her unacceptance of differences. She sees the mosque's women as distanced from herself. The women observe Sirine's uneasiness, distance, and othering. One of them sarcastically tells her: "'It's okay. We don't bite'" (189). I agree with Amal Abdelrazek that the fact that Sirine goes to this religious meeting does not make her mentally or emotionally involved with or perceptive of their practices. Abdelrazek observes that Sirine "attends a meeting about women in Islam, but fails to relate to the Muslim women there. She feels out of place" (205). The narrator tells us that contrary to the aim of the assembly, Sirine later, ironically, "hasn't

thought about issues of the spirit since her visit to the Women in Islam group—which didn't seem to have much to do with spirituality anyway" (264). Clearly, Sirine adopts a Western feminist approach towards those women's Islamic practices, including bodily practices. (I amplify this claim in the next section). Significantly, the veil is exhibit A here.¹⁰

The fact that Sirine embraces an identity-politics schema blocks her from respecting individual differences among the mosque's women. Her naïve picture of their gathering, also referred to in the novel as "*halaka*" (which in Arabic means a religious meeting), is clear in the kind of questions, with which she is preoccupied, simplistic inquiries along the lines of how superficially similar or different these women are from one another. For example, readers get shallow descriptions which aim to show the mosque's women as "cool." Sirine notes that the "girl in the pink sweater snaps her gum and bobs her foot. A number of the women light cigarettes," and also that the "women resume chatting with each other. One woman is working on a crossword puzzle; another, whose hair is covered with a black head scarf, is plaiting the hair of a woman in a fuzzy pink sweater" (189). She sees the women's clothes, their makeup, their gestures, and the architecture of the mosque as cultural *products*. What she does not view, however, is how that gathering may help energize the spirituality of those women.

Although I condemn it when a Muslim man asks a non-Muslim woman (or a Muslim woman) to subscribe to his beliefs, as Han seems to do, I evaluate Sirine's depiction of the women's gatherings as inhumane. It is an Orientalist representation. While I approve of *Crescent's* statement that institutionalized religions do not

necessarily lead to spirituality, I am critical of how this assertion leads to emptying Islamic bodily practices, such as moving one's fingers through prayer beads, praying, fasting, and wearing the veil from any possible spirituality and instead creates ethnographic cultural artifacts out of them.

Crescent empties the use of prayer beads from any potential signifieds that are associated with spirituality. It offers a presentation of prayer beads as beautiful cultural artifacts, which though distanced from religion, are attached to a feeling of comfort. Similar to owning, touching, or seeing a headscarf, as I will explain, moving one's fingers through prayer beads reminds the exilic figure Han of his Arab family, home, and culture. The novel does not question a bodily use of the beads; it actually encourages it, but it does not acknowledge any spirituality of the body accompanying that. For example, leaving Iraq, as an exile, to the US, Han takes resort in prayer beads. To Sirine, prayer beads are not different from a pretty decorative necklace made of blue stones (160). Likewise, Han's response to Sirine's call for some assuring words of love, after they have been talking about his exile, is that he moves his fingers through the beads nervously, "he closes his eyes, his shoulders lowering heavily, and he clicks through his prayer beads" (183). However, this new signified of the use of prayer beads is mechanical and meaninglessly folkloric.

Crescent's approach to the religious bodily practices of praying, attending mosques, and fasting is another case in point. Han explains to Sirine how mosques generally look. He models to her the call for prayers, "*athan*," as well as praying. For her *athan* sounds like singing and the rhythm of praying echoes *a thing* that is different from cooking: "She loves the motion of it and tries to imitate him [Han] but her head

swims a bit and she has to sit back down on the balcony floor. ‘It’s so nice,’ she says quietly. ‘It reminds me of the way I feel sometimes when I am working, like when I stir a pot of soup, or when I knead the bread dough’” (80). At one point, Han explains to Sirine the idea behind fasting in Ramadan. However, all the novel really emphasizes about Ramadan is the material details of food festivities at Nadia’s Café.

Here, I agree with Carol Fadda-Conrey that Sirine’s “indeterminate” religious identity might be positive, since it escapes the defined boundaries of standard categorization (47). Yet, as my argument points out, I do not subscribe to Fadda-Conrey’s interpretation of the value of the calls for prayer and the veil in the novel. Fadda-Conrey sees Han’s call for prayer and his giving his sister’s veil to Sirine as acts of illumination, which enlighten Sirine about a religion, about which she does not know much (“Arab American Literature in the Ethnic Borderland” 47). While I see the benefits of illuminating one’s partner from a different culture about one’s own culture, I also view the drawbacks of the potential desire for converting the lover, on Han’s part and the dangerous Orientalist representation on Sirine’s. The novel, thus, devalues religious practices.

Further, Sirine’s uncle buys her a beautiful set of prayer beads as a gift. Given that Sirine is not a Muslim (as mentioned earlier, she is perceived to be a Muslim by association because she is partly Arab), getting those beads and using them advances the novel’s negative superficial assessment of such religious icons. To begin with, the way in which Sirine holds the prayer beads increases her foreignness in Han’s eyes. He tells her: “‘The way you held them was very delightful—very American’” (31). Also,

when Sirine turns forty-one, her uncle and Um-Nadia give her new prayer beads. Here, again, the emphasis is on the beauty of the beads, which are seen as a work of art, not for any possible spiritual benefits they may give to the body. The narrator informs us that these beads are “irregularly shaped bright blue stones with gold flecks and a gold silk tassel. She fingers them. Sirine sees them as ‘lovely’” (31).

Sirine’s uncle’s comment that the beads are “‘a reminder,’” something to prompt her to say her prayers, is a joke, for there is no context for such advice in the novel (386). However, Um-Nadia’s perception of the same beads as “‘lapis . . . [l]ike the sky” (386) fits the text’s larger framework of reducing the beads to the level of aesthetic articles. Sirine confirms Um-Nadia’s insight by adding that the beads are a “beautiful thing” (386). Later “she takes Han’s prayer beads out of her pocket and kisses them and then puts them in the drawer of her nightstand, along with her new set, and slides it shut” (386). Prayer beads become a symbol of feeling at home, as well as, owning calming and soothing objects, but not experiencing spiritual consolation.

Crescent entertains the common binarism of veiled and unveiled women. Women who wear the veil *and* wear makeup represent an enigma for Sirine. For instance, Sirine refers to Rana (a student of Han’s who has directly invited Sirine to the mosque gathering, based on Han’s desire) as “the ‘the veiled woman’” (110) or “the covered woman” (140). Sirine here defines Rana by what she wears. Additionally, describing one of the women at the mosque, Sirine comments on what, to her, seems contradictory: “The woman’s eyes are black with wine-colored flecks and her lashes are so long they have a slight dip, like a canopy” (186). It is an Orientalist (not unlike an

Islamist) mentality that separates the veil and fashion; the veil and normal life; the veil and modern cosmetics.

Crescent represents the veil, symbolized in Rana, as a cause for chaos and disorder. To illustrate, one day Rana is absent from her class. There ensues a dominant feeling of peace in class. The negative view of the veil is further emphasized in a scene where Han, Rana, and Sirine attend a college party. Mistaking Rana's veil for her own scarf (a gift from Han), Sirine, hysterically, pulls the scarf off of Rana's head in front of the party's attendees.¹¹ It is not the awkwardness of this situation that annoys me. What bothers me the most is the lack of reaction; besides the fact that Rana and Sirine run away from the party (the first because she is forced to reveal parts of her body, which she willingly chooses not to, and the latter because of shame), nothing happens. This incident passes smoothly as if it were normal. No one questions whether it is the right of Sirine—or anyone else, for that matter—to force a female body to appear in a certain way without the consent of its “owner.” Though I question the novel's absence of critique, I appreciate the fact that it parodies how Muslim women in different parts in the globe are forced to either put on or take off the veil.

Crescent creates the veil as a broad cultural symbol. For example, it is a means of reconnecting Han to his Arab culture and family; a tool to remember a dead lover, as in the case of Nathan (an American photographer, a student-admirer of Han's and a lover of Han's late sister); and an aesthetic item, as it is for Sirine. Han's sister's headscarf, which he later gives to Sirine but she loses, is portrayed as anything but a means for attaining spirituality of the body. Nathan tells Sirine how Han's sister used to joke about judging a Muslim woman's religion based on the perfection of her headscarf,

“she had this long wild hair like yours. She would tie it up in her scarf every day, by the end of the day, it will all be fallen down around her shoulders again. She used to say, ‘I want to be a good Muslim but my hair won’t let me’” (99). The female protagonist sees that the headscarf as an artistic piece. She focuses on the beauty of its materiality but does not see any possible nonphysical dimensions of it.

Crescent feeds yet another stereotype against the veil: the veil is a burden that silences women. When it is not on their heads, they feel liberated. Only after Sirine pulls the veil off Rana’s head does Rana confide to Sirine her miserable marital life. Rana makes an arranged marriage at the age of fifteen, because her family has had to “curb” her “wild” attitude (315). Within her marriage, Rana’s sexual life is unfulfilling; the husband wants sex on his own terms; thus, the sex between them is not good. It is likened to rape. Therefore, Rana has become desperate and has decided to have sex with strangers. She tells Sirine: “The only time I’m interested in men anymore is for the game of it. I’ll sleep with one just because I can and then I’ll never see him again” (317). Sirine then goes back to the issue of the veil and asks Rana the question that might come to readers’ minds: “But after all that—well, why do you still wear . . .” (317). This question is significant, for it deconstructs a dominant view that the veil is associated with modesty. This ellipsis (original in the quote) replaces the veil. Rana does not answer this inquiry and thus it is left open; in other words, the veil continues to be viewed as an absence; discussing it has to be done implicitly and with a tone of hesitancy. Questioning the veil is not problematic; it is, in fact, desirable; I am wholeheartedly with the demystification of the veil as *the* Islamic signification. The problem, though, lies in the fact that the novel does not offer an in-depth description of

other veiled women. And so, this one image of the veil runs the risk of being perceived as representative of the veil in general. There is no talk about the spirituality that the veil may generate.

Yet, to its merit, the novel draws our attention to the fact that the veil is sometimes used for pragmatic, often cynical, reasons. For example, it can be a means through which an Orientalist appears a local. Janet,¹² one of a number of foreign women who are in Iraq with their husbands,¹³ seduces the then teenage Han. She uses her money to manipulate him and his family. She wears the veil to hide while visiting Han's family. She wants to pass as a local in the Islamic culture in Iraq so as to fulfill an Orientalist mission she pursues, which is convincing Han and his family that he should pursue a Western education, by telling them that she she is going to sponsor it.

Describing her veil in relation to her foreignness, the narrator tells the reader:

dressed completely in *hejjab* [hijab]—a thick black scarf covered her head and face entirely, and a black coat cloaked her from her neck to her ankles; she wore white gloves and black boots as well. Han's father invited her in and it was immediately clear that this was not an Arab woman—she was too tall and she didn't move like an Arab. When she began speaking in English, Han realized that it was Janet. (255)

In this scene, the audience is assured that Orientalists are outsiders no matter what sneaky ways they may adopt. While I condemn essentializing foreign women based on language and/ or biological differences, I appreciate the novel's point regarding potential uses of the veil as a means for hiding one's identity, because this practice reflects what happens in some Arab countries and is usually involved with crimes. My main argument in this section is that great as it is as a novel, *Crescent* denies Islamic

bodily practices such as using prayer beads and donning the veil any possibility of spirituality.

Situating *Crescent's* Portrayal of Spirituality

Here, I explore some key features of spirituality in relation to both the body and religion so as to put my evaluation of *Crescent* in a larger framework. Clearly, *Crescent* opposes the typical definitions of spirituality. For example, it does not grant the assumption that the spiritual is “connected with the human spirit, rather than the body or physical things” (*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* 1487). It both agrees with and opposes the description of spirituality as something that is “considered primary, more pure, more directly related to the soul in its relation to the divine, while religion is secondary, dogmatic and stifling, often distorted by oppressive sociopolitical and socioeconomic forces” (*Encyclopedia of Religion and Society* 492). While *Crescent* favors spirituality over religion (spirituality becomes “primary” and religion becomes “secondary”), and while it seems to support the idea that organized or institutionalized religions are “dogmatic,” it does not see spirituality as “pure.” Quite the contrary. Spirituality in the novel is produced by physical activities including producing food, sharing love, and voicing stories. Such rituals, Abu-Jaber dramatizes, do not take place in a vacuum: they happen by individuals whose physical descriptions and positionalities are known to the readers. *Crescent* defines spirituality in relation to the body more than to the soul. It points out that the relationship between what is metaphysical and what is physical— what is divine and what is worldly; what is abstract and what is materialist; what is spiritual and what is bodily— is not defined by separation or hierarchy. Though *Crescent's* definition of spirituality is not typical, it has broad cultural contexts.

Abu-Jaber subscribes to a number of theories which see human beings' needs for religious spirituality as social constructs and which, thus, support "material" religions. She seems to adopt a Marxist or materialist philosophy of religion—the spirituality that religion creates is entertained or imagined in a world devoid of spirituality. Expanding on Karl Marx, E F. King helpfully argues: "The objects and images of popular religion can offer an emotive outlet for those in search of a secure identity—a sense of who they are in an increasingly fragmented world" (1). Also, King, not uniquely, asserts that religions work through theories of habitus à la Bourdieu. Abu-Jaber's portrayal of religious bodily practices as artifacts is similar to King's discussion of "material religion," which he defines as "being made up of both images and artifacts" (2). King discusses how the physical rituals of a religion helps one believe in a specific religion: "Through the practices and visual stimuli of material religion we become bodily affirmed in our beliefs within our own particular habitus. To be born into a religious household is to grow into a particular kind of religious sensibility—to become grounded in tenets and beliefs, while also becoming familiar with religious artifacts and religious ways of behavior" (5). He adds, "The things of religion then become *incorporated*, because it is through bodily practices—the way we hold objects, smell them, and wear them—that we orientate our bodies towards things and places" (6). More directly to the subject of this chapter, King explains that the Muslims' repetitive use of religious articles shape their beliefs: "As religious values are passed between generations so, too, is the material cultures of a domestic religious life—the statuses, figurines, pictures, prayer beads, candles, and religious books—and all play a part in how individuals learn to become, and behave, in a particular 'religious' way" (6). For

King, then, one's body produces spirituality through the objects and the images, with which it gets involved. Based on my analysis of *Crescent*, Abu-Jaber, sides with Marx and King's materialist views of religion and spirituality.

The rest of this section focuses on an antithetical model of spirituality, a model which emphasizes Muslim women's agency. I discuss the relationship between the Muslim female body, religious bodily practices, and spirituality as discussed by Pakistani cultural anthropologist Saba Mahmood. I juxtapose Mahmood's stance regarding spirituality with Jaber's. This comparison enables me to create a bigger cultural context for *Crescent's* production of the spirituality of the Muslim female body. By taking this route, I explore an alternate possibility for defining the Muslim woman's spiritualized body. Although I am both appreciative for and critical of Abu-Jaber's and Mahmood's views, for various reasons, I do not assume that one is wrong and the other is right. Nor do I claim to have a prescription for that of which I am critical. Rather, I assess the strengths and the weaknesses of both models.

While Abu-Jaber negates the ability of religious practices to spiritualize the body, Mahmood thinks they do. Mahmood criticizes "secular conception[s] of religiosity,"¹⁴ a category into which Abu-Jaber belongs. Mahmood is critical of the feminisms that see religion at large as a force which takes away one's autonomy and individuality. That is to say, she does not approve of a universally imagined definition of feminism (I do not either), one which applies to all women regardless of their local cultural particularities. For example, she argues that such feminist descriptions are blind to spiritual benefits that result from religious books and practices (*Politics of Piety* 94).

The most obvious is the powerful trope of the autonomous individual—capable of enacting her own desires free from the force of transcendental will, tradition, or custom—that continues to animate many strains of feminism despite trenchant philosophical and anthropological critiques of such a limited conception of the subject A second assumption central to this secularized conception of religiosity is the understanding that a religion’s phenomenal forms—its liturgies, rituals, and scriptures—are inessential to the universal truth it symbolizes. The precise form that scripture and ritualized practices take, in other words, is regarded as inconsequential to the spirituality (immaterial and transcendental) that they are made to substitute. (95)

This generally accepted feminist way of thinking, argues Mahmood, cannot imagine how donning the veil may support Muslim women’s agency. She, however, is able to see empowering piety in wearing the veil. At the same time, she correctly argues that Muslim women may wear the veil to satisfy an internal desire for being pious as opposed to proving something to the outer world and society. Unlike Abu-Jaber, Mahmood sees the veil as a potential practice for attaining spirituality, and not merely for serving various ideologies.

For instance, Mahmood casts the contemporary “Mosque movement” in Egypt as a manifestation of a larger “piety” movement that she rightfully views within a universal Islamic revival since the 1970s (*Politics of Piety*). Mahmood scrutinizes women’s religious practices from 1995 to 1997 in six mosques that represent various socio-economic strata in Egypt. Based on her observations of these mosques, she supports the women mosque-goers’ argument: religious rituals, such as donning the veil, praying, and attending discussions (at a mosque) need to be seen beyond identity politics. She stresses the point that these practices should not be interpreted as an affirmation of a nationalist (cultural) identity or as a sign of the oppression of women in Islam. She insists that by adopting such bodily exercises, these women are not

necessarily trying to represent an identity marker; they hope to cultivate a pious self. In other words, they aim to reach an interior transformation of the self, not to project an exterior statement. She elaborates that these rituals are not hypocritical acts. Nor are they automatically performative. This “ritual is not regarded as a theatre in which a performed self enacts a script of social action; rather, the space of ritual is one among a number of sites where the self comes to acquire and give expression to its proper form” (131). They are acts in which the self gets constituted. Mahmood is able to see the “Mosque movement” in Egypt through a symptomatic lens informed by respect for both religion and spirituality.

My earlier discussion of the representation of the women gatherings at the mosque in *Crescent* exemplifies the reductive “secular conception of religiosity” of which Mahmood is critical. Abu-Jaber’s female protagonist fails to see the mosque’s women as individuals or to imagine how their religious bodily practices may spiritualize their bodies, and how doing so might achieve a sense of liberation which they seek for themselves and which is not necessarily defined by individualistic autonomy.

Clear in Mahmood’s argument are two main points. First, she is critical of the dominant definition of agency as an act of resistance to something. In this regard, she suggests that “we think of agency not as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination but as a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create” (“Feminist Theory, Agency” 112). Second, she questions the correctness of the claim that all women need liberation and autonomy, arguing, instead, that such assumptions are based on the fact that women in all contexts

define agency in the same manner. Behind this problem, she emphasizes, is the fact that feminist traditions at large are preoccupied with making political decisions characterized by prescriptive functions rather than analytical roles.

Mahmood points out that a better way to understand Islamic bodily rituals is through the lens of *habitus*, particularly as defined by Aristotle, a pedagogy through which the individual consciously trains herself to acquire beliefs, which, in effect, are going to become incorporated in her lifestyle and thus are going to positively shape her daily rituals, including bodily formalities.¹⁵ Though acknowledging the fact that *habitus* is mostly used by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (as mentioned earlier), Mahmood examines the concept from its historical origin, Aristotle. According to Bourdieu's definition, *habitus* is determined by the social class one comes from. Mahmood complains that "Bourdieu . . . leaves aside the pedagogical aspect of the Aristotelian notion as well as the context of ethics within which the notion of *habitus* was formulated" (139). She criticizes Bourdieu's discussion of *habitus* for its lack of the description of "how specific conception of the self . . . requires different kinds of bodily capacities" (139). However, Aristotle's discussion of *habitus*, she asserts, "forces us to problematize how specific kinds of bodily practice come to articulate different conceptions of the ethical subject, and how bodily form does not simply express the social structure but also endows the self with particular capacities through which the subject comes to enact the world" (139). Bourdieu's standpoint on *habitus* conflicts with what Mahmood observes in the Mosque movement, where women from various class backgrounds and mosques in different socio-economic backgrounds share similar understanding of the phenomenon of the rise of Islam in Egypt, and also interpret their

understanding through their religious and spiritual practices, which involve the body in one way or another, in similar manners. Also, she rightly critiques Bourdieu's failure to discuss the conscious habituation of the self; the body is a text in which rituals are inscribed in conscious and unconscious ways (on the part of the self). Similar to Foucault, Mahmood argues that there is no self that is not a product of construction. She recommends that one move beyond inherited simplistic definition of agency as an act of resistance to (outside) sources.

For Mahmood, unlike for Abu-Jaber, practicing bodily religious rituals is one avenue through which Muslim women may attain spirituality. At the same time, it is these women's desires to develop spiritual selves that lead them to engage in such bodily religious practices in the first place. In other words, she views spirituality, religion, and the female body as interwoven. Such religious practices are not seen as hierarchical. Their being outside forces is inconsequential, because there is no self that is formulated outside the system anyway. Basically, Mahmood says that we need to reconsider our manufactured desire for autonomy, our limited definition of agency as a resistance to something, and our prepackaged need for liberation from whatever tries to shape our bodies. Only then can we see these practices as agents that develop both the body and the soul.¹⁶

The illuminating difference between Mahmood and Abu-Jaber lies in philosophy and practice. Both believe that physical and spiritual activities are inseparable. They two believe that spirituality leads to and is caused by habitus, à la Aristotle, conscious and unconscious bodily activities. Yet, Abu-Jaber differs from

Mahmood in her belief that secular activities such as sharing food, love, and stories attain the spirituality of the body. Abu-Jaber portrays religious rituals and objects as mere cultural artifacts, which takes us back to the identity politics Mahmood wants to move beyond. On the other hand, Mahmood thinks that religious activities produce spirituality. I argue that both authors offer singular useful definitions of the relationship between the body and the spirit under the umbrella of Muslim women's cultures. My point of analyzing Mahmood's philosophy is to contextualize Abu-Jaber's, as manifested in *Crescent*. I want to offer a picture of an oppositional avenue so as to develop a deeper understanding of Abu-Jaber's choices and a realization of where these choices come from and what they lead to.

Sharing Love and Deconstructing Myths

This section examines *Crescent's* alternate models for spiritualizing the Muslim female body. I focus mainly on the subject of sharing love (performing sexuality), and I touch upon the topic of sharing food. I use the term sharing love because I believe that it is broader than having sex; it signifies that one shares their entire body with someone else, which suits the narrative's description of the relationship between Sirine and Han. However, for the sake of convenience and for a desire to place my work in relation to other sexuality studies, I use, for the most part, the dominant term "sexuality." Examining the subject of sexuality to negotiate cultural norms is common among ethnic, feminist, and postcolonial writers.

To reiterate, the protagonist Sirine does not find her tranquility in systematic religious practices, but in relational material activities such as sharing food with her

customers at Nadia's Café and with her lover Han, sharing love with Han, and sharing stories with her uncle. In other words, Sirine's body gets spiritualized through her engagement in these interactive actions and not through religion. Sirine's creation of food for others is a clear example of this. The narrator informs the reader that "whenever she tries to deliberately seek out something like God, she gets distracted, her mind winds back to her body, and she finds that instead she is thinking about something like stuffed grape leaves rolled tightly around rice, ground lamb, garlic onions, currants, fragrant with green olive oil" (264). Love, food, and stories are Sirine's spirituality.

The physical description of Sirine is important. She is the center of attraction at the café. She has always been the focus of men's interest.¹⁷ She is described as more attractive than pretty. She has wild hair, which does not suit her profession as a cook. The narrator informs us that "She has the worst kind of hair for a chef, curly and viney and falling all over her shoulders, resisting ponytails and scarves and braids" (20). Although she looks like a typical white American woman, she carries herself as Arab American, and the food she produces at the café is Arabic. Most importantly, she is perceived as purely Arab and Muslim.¹⁸ Sirine looks everything she is not. The reader is informed that she has not had sex for a long time before she meets Han, and that their first sexual intercourse reminds her of what sex is like. Sirine is not one thing, but many.

Through its presentation of the character of Sirine, *Crescent* portrays two main models of sexuality in relation to spirituality.¹⁹ The fact that Sirine is involved in sexual relationships with two men who come from different Islamic categories is significant. I do not want to essentialize her sexual partners, but their positions towards Islam matter

to the development of their sexual relationship with her. Han does not practice Islam as a religion, yet, as an exile, he belongs to Islam as a culture that comforts him and brings him home. Sirine's sexual relationship with the exile Iraqi lover, Han, is part of a nurturing love story. It makes up for the absence of religion and home. It is their source for spirituality. Sirine meets Han at Nadia's Café, where many UCLA professors and students of Arabic descent socialize. She is attracted to his "oriental" looks and to his introduction of Arabic poetry reading, even though she is not interested in reading poetry. The second model of sexuality is embodied by Aziz, the poet, and Han's friend. The former takes place within a love story and the latter is a transient relation and is based on momentary sexual arousal. Both relationships affirm sexuality in the novel although in different ways.

To a significant extent, my analysis of *Crescent's* discourse of sexuality is inspired by Michel Foucault's theory of sexuality in relation to both power and resistance. I see sexuality in the novel as a product of power.²⁰ As Foucault teaches us, sexuality is not a natural instinct or drive; it is a social construct.²¹ I read the two sexual intercourses in the novel as products of multiple, mobile, and centerless powers, for example, as reflections of diaspora and home. Both Han and Aziz are diasporic figures, although as mentioned earlier, Han is also an exile. They two are "hungry for" their home countries, Iraq and Syria respectively. I agree with Arab American scholar Amal Abdelrazek that the "one who is most hungry for Sirine's food and its flavor so reminiscent of home is Hanif Eyad [Han], the exiled Iraqi professor" (187). Sirine symbolizes home for her lovers.

Simultaneously, sexuality in the novel represents acts of resistance against multiple positions of power.²² This representation includes institutionalized religions, for all sexual acts in the novel happen in extramarital relationships. I see this as a political statement regarding the institution of marriage in particular and towards organized religions at large.

Like other ethnic and feminist writers, Abu-Jaber discusses gender-based power in association with sexuality.²³ Significantly, she deals with gendered spaces. To illustrate, the Arab customers of Nadia's Café are mainly males. In the context of the novel, the reader understands that this restriction results from inherited Arab customs that do not welcome the presence of females in public spaces such as cafés. For instance, early in the novel, a male Egyptian student who comes to eat at the café mistakes it for an American place because he sees women. The mingling of males and females in the US shocks him. He thinks that if this socializing were to happen in the Arab world, it would be an indirect call for having sex: "In my village, the guys and women eat apart from each other, to stay out of trouble. This is the first American house I've really eaten at" (218). To me, this assumption denotes a Synecdochic perception of Arab women; they are vaginas. He explains that in the Arab culture, the female body is meant to be preserved in a private space of the family's house: "The Arab families usually keep their daughters safe at home. The few women who do manage to come to America are good students—they study at the library and cook for themselves" (19). Obviously, the fact that Arab women belong to their own private space is an example of a socially constructed ideology. The novel does a good job of critiquing this perception, for Um-Nadia assures the Egyptian visitor that Lebanon does not practice such an

ideology. More importantly, the café becomes a place where both males and females meet and discuss various issues of politics, history, and culture. In other words, it sets an example for a gender-neutral site. It has developed to be the locale where Han and Sirine begin to fall in love, which leads to multiple sexual scenes later in the novel. Abu-Jaber negotiates “commonsensical” myths in relation to public spaces.

The novel’s discussion of the invisibility of the female body in relation to sexuality is very effective. The main reason why Sirine falls in love with Han is that he actually “sees her” (53). He perceives her as an individual, with both a body and a soul. She has long encountered Arab men who have seen her only as a body. For instance, she complains that some Arab males see her body as a sacred entity, which can be “explored” only within the institution of marriage but is shameful otherwise. She also criticizes how other Arab males view her as a potential sex object. In this regard, the narrator tells us: “Most Arab men have always been eminently polite to her, filled with an Old World propriety, so formal, they seem almost not to see her but to see an outline captioned: Woman” (53). In both cases, her “real” (female) body is invisible. In these two scenarios, the Arab males are not able to get who she is. Abu-Jaber’s novel skillfully attacks these socially fabricated mythological images of the female body of a Muslim woman.

Sirine’s love for Han, their love sharing, constitutes an act of resistance. It is an expression of her love for her own body’s visibility and voice. Unlike many other Arab men in Sirine’s life, Han demystifies the manufactured holiness of her body. He is able to recognize her as a human being, who is neither sacred nor shameful.

Their physical relationship challenges institutionalized religions by disregarding marriage, yet it exemplifies the interweaving of spirituality and sexuality. For example, after sharing love with Han, Sirine feels “chaste.” Abu-Jaber skillfully shows readers how sexual and spiritual discourses are intertwined. In one scene, Han asks (naked) Sirine to put on his mother’s veil (further in the narrative, the reader learns it belongs to Han’s late sister’s). When she does, he flatters her physical beauty, saying: ““Now I see an Arab woman in you—an aristocrat, ancient royalty He touches her eyes and lips. ‘And here.’ He runs his hand along her naked body, then slides it around the cusp of her hip. ‘It looks exactly right on you.’” Humorously, Sirine questions the “normal” binarism between sexuality and spirituality by asking: ““You mean being veiled? She touches the edge of the scarf against her throat. ‘Or being naked?’ She pulls one edge of the scarf down her face. ‘Like that?’” (161). The answer is either way is fine.

Yet, their sexual relationship does not challenge Han’s Occidentalist perception of Sirine’s body, for throughout the novel he never fails to “Other” her. To illustrate, he consistently views their sex as “exotic” (157). For him, she has always been American. Also, Han’s sexual involvement with Sirine does not prevent him from encouraging her to take part in what I read as a vague religious discourse. In the same fashion, she, too sees him as a mysterious Oriental figure. The narrator informs the reader of the exoticism of their sex: “She inhales the scent on the inside of his neck and inside his hair. The smell of salt. . . . She is buzzing with her desire, from their stream of kisses, from an exotic night in a still strange room” (156-157). Their sexual relation remains a carrier of Orientalist ideologies. This means that their sex nudges institutional ideologies, but it does not overcome those ideologies completely.

Through Han's and Sirine's relationship, the novel makes a point of praising sexual reciprocity. It gives the reader minute details about some sexual scenes, which shows that their love sharing includes more than genital sex. More importantly, their sexuality represents their philosophy: nature, wildness, and materialist details such as food and sex are intertwined.²⁴ Together, these details lead not only to ecstasy but also to an uplifting of the soul, to spirituality.

The discourse they develop after making love is as important to the development of the narrative as their intercourse. Han gives Sirine nicknames which allude to body parts. (In Arabic culture, this act signifies love and endearment). He then translates his words to English. Sirine likes those words of loving and invites Han to say more. Han says, "*Ya elbi* [my heart] *ya hayati* [my life]" "*ya eyeni* [my eyes]" and she likes it after knowing the meaning in Arabic. "*Ya wardi* [my flower] . . . *ya thahabi* [my treasure]." The narrator here offers a very significant, if didactic, comment that explains to the reader that the value of Han and Sirine's relationship comes from interweaving the physical and the metaphysical,²⁵ the bodily and the spiritual. Not only does Han's translation deliver the meaning from one language to another but it interprets love from one culture to another.²⁶

Sirine's and Han's love-sharing is part of a larger picture that encompasses other materialist details such as making food.²⁷ Sexually but also metaphorically, Sirine sees Han as "food." "She opens her mouth and tastes his skin and tongue. He is amber and caramel and earth-colored. His skin excites her; she inhales deeply, as if she could take in his essence; he tastes of almond, of sweetness" (126).²⁸ Just as making love needs harmony, making food requires compatibility.

Crescent's second model of a sexuality-spirituality relationship is offered through a character that symbolizes Arabic poetry (and art at large), eroticism, and Sufism. This second model is embodied in the relationship of Sirine and Aziz, the "Syrian poet who tempts Sirine to stray" (Field 209). Before Aziz's poetry reading, Han introduces him: "He is an erotic poet, a scholarly poet, a holy poet of mind and body, one who understands how to bear us, unconscious, through language, into our purest dreams" (29). Unlike Han's and Sirine's love-making-spirituality connection, the spirituality associated with Aziz's and Sirine's casual sex does not come from sharing love but from the symbol Aziz characterizes in the novel, which, to a great extent, echoes the novel's philosophy regarding the body.

The relationship between Sirine and Aziz is intriguing. The narrator describes to us how Sirine is attracted to Aziz's looks (which are similar to Han's) when she first sees him, "she looks up and Aziz's face is close to hers. She notices the fine, precise shape of his eyes, black as Han's and for the moment just as vulnerable; his lips are full and crescent-curved. She feels light-headed with the lilt of his breath on her face and she feels herself sliding, weakening, intoxicated with the pleasure of attraction" (291). Sirine and Aziz have sex one time and make out another time. The sex between them is situational; it is based on instant physical attraction on both sides but nothing else. The reader is made to conclude that Sirine disrespects Aziz; she feels guilty after having sex with him. Sirine loses her interest in making and consuming food after she sleeps with Aziz. Aziz is a womanizer who is sexually "hungry," not for Sirine in particular but for women's bodies in general. Unlike Sirine, Aziz does not feel remorseful for betraying Han. Though this sexual relationship is presented as sinful and does not include the

metaphorical sharing of the lovers' bodies, which we find in the first model of sexuality, Aziz's love for art, Sufism, and eroticism and his ability to see spirituality in them affirm the novel's philosophy of spirituality.

For Aziz, art should serve the quotidian details of this life and not utopia. He is critical of the aloofness, as he sees it, of classic Middle Eastern poetry: "It's all nightingales that aren't really birds and roses that aren't really flowers. And the big-head critics say Omar Khayyam wasn't really writing about food and wine, it was more divine love or some other nicety-nice. Nobody can ever just enjoy themselves" (117).²⁹ To explain, Aziz wants art and religious bodily practices to dwell in this world with its reality, secularism, and quotidian details.

Aziz does not define himself through binarism. He does not see himself as either a Muslim or a non-Muslim. When asked whether or not he is a Muslim, he answers: "Who knows? I am Aziz, I am large, I contain multitudes. I defy classification" (105). More related to my thesis in this chapter is Aziz's standpoint regarding prayers and sex. He thinks that prayers need to serve sex and not the other way around: "I prefer when the prayers turn out to be about sex, not the other way around" (117). In other words, he does not see religion as hierarchically more spiritualizing than sex. This opinion is in harmony with *Crescent's* larger message about the body and spirituality.

The novel juxtaposes the Sufis' meetings, to which Sirine has gone once with Aziz, with the women's mosque meetings. Though Sirine has not been able to find any spirituality in the latter, as discussed above, she can do so in the former. Sirine can relate her body to the spirituality that results from Sufi bodily practices. This kind of

spirituality is closer to Sirine, because unlike the aloofness of the women's meetings, Sufi dances remind Sirine of the rhythm of her cooking. She becomes comforted and soothed by this similarity. The narrator informs us: "Pinned between listening and watching, Sirine feels transported, in the presence of something like a miracle. She leans forward, forgets to think about anything. All that matters is the swirl of the movement, so familiar to Sirine, giving thought over to the body: repetitive, sustaining. Like a stirring pot" (265). Aziz takes her to a "whirling prayer ceremony" called Sema. (264). She learns the meaning of Sema from the program, "'a journey through the universe before God, a spiritual intoxication that takes one to the true existence by means of ecstasy'" (264). Aziz symbolizes a marriage between spirituality and sexual happiness.

Sexuality Otherwise

Now I would like to place Abu-Jaber's treatment of these two sexual models in relation to other ethnic and feminist authors so as to position *Crescent* in a larger context. By focusing on sexuality as one main source of spirituality, *Crescent* seems to agree with a number of ethnic literatures. For example, Donna Weir-Soley observes that in "many West African-based spiritual traditions, sexual expression is an integral part of the spiritual experience. The dramatization of human sexuality can be observed and practiced through rituals, prayers, and deities" (2). Although both Weir-Soley and Abu-Jaber reflect the same assumption, the inseparability of sexuality and spirituality, Abu-Jaber does not discuss how spirituality may serve sexuality. For example, *Crescent* focuses only on how sexuality leads to spirituality. More broadly, by entertaining sexuality in the novel, the author seems to agree with a number of feminist and

postcolonial voices in seeing the suppression of sexuality as a negative act of power. Abu-Jaber's stance regarding sexuality, then, represents a fight against this repressive power.

Abu-Jaber's perception of society's repression of female sexuality as a damaging social construct is similar to Audre Lorde's point that normalizing sexuality is also an act of power. Like Abu-Jaber, the sexuality that Lorde discusses is inclusive, broader than mere sexual drive. Lorde's definition of "eroticism" reflects her understanding of the historical development that this term passes through and the multiple meanings it encompasses: "The very word *erotic* comes from the Greek word *eros*, the personification of love in all its aspects—born of Chaos, and personifying creative power and harmony." Further, Lorde emphasizes the significant role that eroticism plays in women's lives. She notes: "When I speak of the erotic . . . I speak of it as an assertion of the life force of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and the use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our work, our lives" (55). Lorde's theory of the interconnectedness of body power, knowledge, and spirituality is applicable to Abu-Jaber's *Crescent*.

Like Abu-Jaber, I assert, Lorde insists that seeing eroticism as pornographic is political, not natural. Lorde explains that due to repetitive attempts to view pornography and eroticism as the same thing, which many social mythologies typically do, "it has become fashionable to separate the spiritual (psychic and emotional) from the political, to see them as contradictory or antithetical" (55). Here Lorde observes that societies have taught us to think of spirituality in isolation from physicality and to internalize such inherited dogmas:

we have attempted to separate the spiritual and the erotic, thereby reducing the spiritual to a world of flattened affect, a world of the ascetic who aspires to feel nothing. But nothing is farther from the truth. For the ascetic position is one of the highest fear, the gravest immobility. The severe abstinence of the ascetic becomes the ruling obsession. And it is one not of self-discipline but of self-abnegation. (55-56)

The *erotic*, Lorde argues, is an act of resistance to various social institutions. No wonder, then, societies encourage us to not entertain the erotic.³⁰ It is a weapon against various social establishments, including religious foundations. Lorde's philosophy of living life "inside out," entertaining the body, and seeing the outside world through it, agrees with Abu-Jaber's, and that of female protagonist Sirine.

Further, the gist of Abu-Jaber's secular theory of sexuality, as manifested in *Crescent*, in relation to spirituality is similar to theologian Kelly Brown Douglas's assumption that sexuality determines who one is: "[a] person's ability to enter into right relationship with God corresponds to one's ability to affirm who she/he is as a sexual being, in short, to affirm her/ his sexuality. Sexuality and religious discourse, sexuality and God-talk are thus naturally linked" (105). Unlike Abu-Jaber, Douglas's standpoint, like Lorde's, stems from black theologies. Yet, these writers aim for social justice. Like Douglas and Lorde, Abu-Jaber's definition of sexuality is larger than sex. Differently, though, Abu-Jaber does not grant a relationship between sexuality and religious discourses.

In this chapter I have argued that Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent* (2003) resists the social construction of the Muslim female body by redefining spirituality. Religious institutions often make us believe that disciplining the body through religious rituals is the only way in which we can achieve spirituality. These rituals are almost always

filtered through patriarchy. By stating that the body itself is spiritual, through focusing on sharing food, sharing love, and sharing stories, and by dramatizing the idea that the body does not need to abide by religious institutions and ideologies, Abu-Jaber's *Crescent* critically negotiates those fabrications. My main critique of the novel, though, is that it does not distinguish between religion and patriarchal interpretations of religion, and that it offers only one way for attaining spirituality, which makes religious bodily activities cultural artifacts. These shortcomings, aside, *Crescent* is a beautifully written, and sophisticated novel that represents a paradigm shift concerning the female body in contemporary Arab American literature by women.

Chapter Three

Trickster Humor in Randa Jarrar's *A Map of Home* (2008):

Negotiating Arab American Muslim Female Sexuality

This chapter explores ethnic humor as one mode of resistance to cultural fabrications of the body. Ethnic humor is a way which contemporary Arab American women writers employ in their portrayal of the social construction of the Muslim female body. The fact that humor has long been used in gender and ethnic studies aligns the writings of Arab American women with a larger body of ethnic and feminist literatures. In this chapter, I explore the use of trickster humor as a resistance strategy against the sexual norms presented in Palestinian-Greek-Egyptian-American Randa Jarrar's *A Map of Home* (2008).

Inspired by Lisa Suhair Majaj, Tanyss Ludescher argues that in order for future Arab American scholarship to appreciate the subtle treatment of ethnicity, it needs to move beyond analyzing content. One way of doing so, she argues, is to explore "ethnic humor" (109). Although Ludescher is mainly talking about the second wave of Arab American literature, I find her recommendation particularly applicable to the current third wave.

Many Arab American writers and performers have developed ways to discuss racial and gendered stereotypes in their works without resorting to tragedy. Arab American stand-up comedians, both men and women, use humor as a way to address cultural labels without subscribing to dichotomies and without offering corrective models for the self or demonizing others. In her *Arab-American Women's Writing and*

Performance, Somaya Sami Sabry explores the methods in which Arab American women performers negotiate their representations of gender and race (164). Agreeing with Allison Fraiberg, Sabry argues that through the “dual techniques of reflection and subversion, Arab-American stand-up comedians . . . manage to negotiate racial and cultural affiliations and subvert prevalent stereotypes and race-thinking structures” (149-150). I hold that *A Map of Home* belongs to this tradition of literature. Through humor, the novel reflects on Arab, American, and Arab American affiliations. It subverts orthodoxy on various levels in hopes to liberate the Muslim female body from longstanding cultural mythologies.

However, criticism of Arab American literature, like that of ethnic American literatures at large, has focused mainly on substance, prioritizing issues, such as political correctness and social justice, at the expense of form. I believe that such critical arguments come from the faulty assumptions that appreciating the aesthetic weakens the political. For instance, current scholarship on *A Map of Home* has overlooked the relationship between humor (form and content, as I argue) and sexuality (content), though a number of reviewers and critics have acknowledged the presence of humor. Dina Jadallah, for example, describes *A Map of Home* as “delightfully humorous, poetic, and thought-provoking” (110). Steven Salaita characterizes it as “by turns and sometimes all at once funny, moving, lewd, introspective, crass, sarcastic, witty, crude, and sincere” (*Modern Arab American Fiction* 130). In their dissertations, Lisa Suhair Majaj and Sabiha Sorgun, but Majaj more than Sorgun, touch upon the use of humor in *A Map of Home*, although neither discusses how humor contributes to the achievement of Arab American Muslim female agency. Sorgun seems apologetic about

the novel's humor. Majaj argues that by "using both black humor and an understanding of human complexity, Jarrar is able to raise difficult issues while at the same time fending off cooptation" (234). Despite considerable scholarship on Jarrar's groundbreaking work, existing critical inquiries lack integration of humor as both content and form.

Conversely, this chapter evaluates *A Map of Home* as a novel that not only employs humor but is about humor. Humor constitutes Jarrar's standpoint on the confrontation of racial and gender injustices. Reading female protagonist and narrator, Nidali Ammar, as a trickster figure, I contend that the trickster that *A Map of Home* celebrates and that Nidali enacts prompts readers to laugh at key cultural conventions fabricated by Orientalism and Islamism to manufacture the "proper" diasporic female body. I analyze a range of interconnected sexual themes in the novel, including sexual boundaries, sexual orientations, and codes of honor, in order to highlight oppressive aspects of dominant cultural productions and to illustrate how humor questions impositions and negotiates female agency. Despite adopting this interethnic critical move, this chapter does not overlook Arab American cultural specificities; most significantly, it does not underestimate the sociopolitical context of gender particularities. Rather, it aims to highlight bonds with other ethnic literatures.

Using an interethnic approach to read Arab American and Arab literatures is not new, but is rarely attempted. Critics Carol Fadda-Conrey and Steven Salaita have both taken major steps in this direction. Extending Gloria Anzaldúa's definition of borderlands, Fadda-Conrey believes: "This critical approach would ultimately help alleviate the invisibility plaguing Arab Americans" (192). She highlights the potential

danger of essentialism, particularly overlooking differences when stressing sameness across ethnic groups. A bit closer to my point, Salaita offers a transnational and transcultural reading of Native American Gerald Vizenor and Palestinian Emile Habiby. He treats Habiby's novel, *The Secret Life of Saed*, as a trickster narrative ("Reimagining the Munificence of an Ass" 143). I endorse Salaita's claim that this comparative perspective "allows critics and readers to better integrate Palestinian history into the body of scholarship that has begun forging connections across borders and cultures" (143). Plus, my research goes further by exploring Arab origins of tricksters.

I begin this chapter by briefly introducing the novel and then surveying the value of ethnic humor, which serves as a theoretical framework for trickster humor. After that, I discuss key characteristics of trickster humor, the main mode of ethnic humor that *A Map of Home* employs. Next, I examine the novel's representation of Orientalism and Islamism to provide a cultural context for the final section. To conclude, I analyze the novel's use of trickster humor in relation to sexuality. What this chapter does not do is historicize humor, including trickster humor theories.

Introducing the Novel

A Map of Home takes a different and innovative approach to portraying the Muslim female body. Unlike *The Girl in The Tangerine Scarf* and *Crescent*, *A Map of Home* does not describe Arab American communities. Instead, it focuses on delineating how the family unit reflects larger institutions. Furthermore, the novel's focus on secular Arab American Muslims heterogenizes the perception of Muslims in the US. It challenges the readers' "hunger for" the consumption of dominant Islamist rhetoric

regarding the Muslim female body. By shifting the radar to secular Islam in Arab America, Jarrar brings to the table an often unnoticed context for stereotyping Arabs, which, though not directly associated with Islam, happens because of conflicts in an Orientalist-and-Islamist contact zone. Metaphorically, I call such stereotypes “sponge stereotypes,” i.e., while the individual might not share the convictions of the societies, in which he/she happens to live (they may, in fact, be against those beliefs), they still “absorb” some of these societies’ teachings. This process is quite different from habitus because it does not necessitate that the individual practices certain societal rituals. My discussion of *A Map of Home* seeks to develop the depiction of the Muslim female body metaphor.

Jarrar’s award-winning, critically acclaimed, and controversial debut novel, *A Map of Home*, constitutes a genuine contribution to contemporary Arab American literature. I agree with Salaita that the novel fills an open terrain in the field, “Jarrar luckily found a gap in the Arab American literary tradition and filled it. The novel with which she filled it is indeed unlike anything that has been published before it by Arab American writers” (*Modern Arab American Fiction* 130). It has been translated into half a dozen languages and has won an Arab-American Book Award and a Hopwood Award. Indeed, it has been named one of the best novels of 2008 by Barnes and Noble. Not surprisingly, *A Map of Home* has attracted a wide range of audiences, academic and non-academic alike.

Several sources have examined biographical dimensions of the novel.¹ *A Map of Home* embodies complex multi-layered sociopolitical and religio-historical contexts, including the Israeli-Palestinian discord; the Kuwait-Iraq war of the 1990s; American

Orientalism; British colonial education in Kuwait; repercussions of the French colonization of Egypt; and economically motivated diaspora from underdeveloped Arab countries to the US. This rich cultural framework especially foregrounds the dialectics between various forms in which Islamist and Orientalist ideologies fabricate the Muslim female body. To its great credit, the world of the novel heterogenizes and humanizes Arab Americans. It demythologizes stereotypes, ideologies, and oppressive norms.

A brief summary of *A Map of Home* supplies context for my analysis. Jarrar's female protagonist and narrator, Nidali Ammar, comes from a multiethnic background: like Jarrar, she is born to an Egyptian-Greek mother and a Palestinian-Jordanian father. The Arabic meaning of Nidali is "struggle" or "strife," which is indicative of the life struggle Nidali and her family encounter. "Ammar" means a builder or a constructor, which refers to the father's attempt to build a future for his Palestinian family in diaspora. The text begins in the US when Nidali is newly born and ends also in the US when she is sixteen. It comes in three parts. In part one, Nidali's family moves from the US to Kuwait in search of financial improvement. (This movement takes place in the 1990s, when the Palestinians are not welcomed in Kuwait due to Yasser Arafat's support of Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait). In part two, the family migrates to Egypt where they live in a resort apartment in Alexandria and lack stability. In part three, they immigrate to the US for economic reasons. For a long time, they live in a mobile home, which emphasizes their unstable diasporic identity. It is not till the end of the novel that they settle down in a regular house. Nidali, the peripatetic figure, a consummate feature of the trickster par excellence, constantly adapts her survival

strategies to shifting spatial and temporal contexts. The novel's trickster humor critiques orthodoxies.

It is necessary to state clearly that *A Map of Home's* gender themes, including its discussion of sexuality, need to be perceived within a large complex contemporary political frame. Readers cannot fully understand the effect of the novel's trickster humor without realizing the damaging impact of the Israeli colonization of Palestine on the natives, both men and women. These colonial facts enable us to account for the sardonic yet bitter tones attached to the novel's humor. *A Map of Home* is far from being a merely funny novel. The gender injustices it manifests reflect intersecting factors: (1) the unhuman violence that Nidali's (Palestinian) father, Waheed Ammar, experiences at the hands of the bestial Israeli colonizers. Like many, if not all, Palestinians, whether in Palestine or in diaspora, Waheed gets traumatized by colonial patriarchy, which creates exile, dispossession, and homelessness. Waheed's state of confusion leads to tragic and patriarchal attitudes. (2) US anti-Arab racism. (3) secular, as well as, orthodox patriarchy.

However, Jarrar does not let her characters become victims. The author is critical of self-victimization regardless of any extenuating nationalist and transnational circumstances that one may face. The novel presents a negative picture of Waheed's giving in to his tragic circumstances. First, Waheed limits himself to writing poetry that discusses national issues tragically then he stops writing altogether. Readers note how the father figure in the novel projects these circumstances on his family and particularly his daughter. Along the way, Jarrar condemns domestic abuse as well as colonial tragedies. Instead, Jarrar recommends humor as a survival strategy.

The character of Waheed is not easy to pin down; he is not simply the clichéd patriarchal father and husband.² For instance, Waheed's insistence that his daughter get a good education, become a writer, and, thus, maintain a voice for the Palestinian experience is merciful and fatherly. Moreover, it shows that he believes that women are strong cultural preservers. In this context, *A Map of Home*'s trickster humor is a strategy against tragedy and victimization; it represents Jarrar's chosen mode of resistance to the debilitating stereotypical fabrication of the Arab character, particularly that of the Arab woman.

Accounting for Ethnic Humor

In this section, I want to highlight the value of ethnic humor in order to contextualize my reading of *A Map of Home* as a trickster narrative. Before I begin, I wish to make it clear that I perceive the term ethnic as political. A person or a society becomes ethnic only when they are compared to another entity that is, by default, seen as mainstream. Ethnicity gets constituted in various ways both by ethnic and mainstream groups. Wsevolod W. Isajiw's definition of ethnicity is useful here, "ethnicity is a matter of a double boundary, a boundary from within, maintained by the socialization process and a boundary from without established by the process of intergroup relations" (122). By reading *A Map of Home* through the lens of ethnic humor, rather than humor in general, I agree with Leon Rappoport that ethnic humor enables us to vocalize ethnic issues in a way that mainstream (another political term) humor does not. Rappoport argues that, although we need to see ethnic humor in relation to a larger frame of humor, we have to preserve the particularities of ethnic

humor. This chapter operates from the perspective of the identity issues that ethnic humor can represent.

How can ethnic humor affect the identity of the colonized subject? Susanne Reichl and Mark Stein, postcolonial theorists, ask a fundamental question in this regard: does ethnic humor transform or preserve the power structures manifested in the incongruities between the oppressor and the oppressed? Wondering if humor fulfills agency for the oppressed (10), they note that although postcolonial humor (which overlaps with ethnic humor) stems from shared ethnic values, it does not homogenize ethnic groups. The ethnic community that ethnic humor builds, Reichl and Stein argue, is “imagined.” Quite differently, Werner Sollors argues, in his much-cited *Beyond Ethnicity*, that ethnic humor is “a double-edged sword;” it may lead either to transcending or to solidifying ethnic boundaries. On the one hand, it liberates the constructed boundaries among various ethnicities. Also, it extends ethnic communities by constantly attracting outside members, who have once been the objects of ethnic jokes, by integrating them and developing new objectives (132). Yet, on the other hand, “the community of laughter itself is an ethnicizing phenomenon, as we develop a sense of we-ness in laughing with others” (132).³ I find Sollors’ argument convincing, for ethnic humor may lead to either cultural separatism or inclusiveness. My chapter shows that *A Map of Home*’s ethnic humor creates a rhetoric of inclusiveness, because the subject matter of the novel’s humor and its mode of representation go beyond Arab American ethnicity.

Back to basics: is employing humor as a resistance strategy in ethnic literature good or bad? A number of humor and postcolonial theorists have argued that ethnic

humor makes use of the techniques of “conflict” and “control” to liberate readers from preconceived polarized norms. For example, Joseph Boskin and Joseph Dorinson use the term “conflict” to highlight the differences between ethnic groups and mainstream cultures. They employ the word “control” to denote the togetherness of ethnic group members. Ulrike Erichsen goes a step further in Erichsen perception of “conflict” by recognizing a “‘productive’ potential of humor and laughter” (30). Erichsen argues:

Humor in postcolonial texts can be employed as a means to defuse . . . cultural conflict by pointing out cultural differences without the need to ‘solve’ the potential conflict or to decide which frame of reference is more appropriate . . . [H]umor can fulfill a mediating function: indicating differences in cultural practices but also bridging gaps in cultural knowledge. (39-40)

In other words, it dehierarchizes opposing powers and invites the reader to reconsider the necessity for having to select one power, to which he/she may belong.⁴ Further, Martin Holly observes that ethnic humor embodies inherent multiplicity: by entertaining the co-existence of oppositions, the “capacity for humor to contain a double space qualifies it as a technique by which ethnic writers can create hybrid perspectives within their works” (145). In other words, due to its aptitude for the portrayal of the multi layers of life, ethnic humor negotiates the manufactured (marginal) position of ethnic literature—since it does not view values in simple singular or dualistic forms (145). Clear in Holly’s argument is a sound critique of any rhetoric of singularity or sameness. This suppleness makes humor a suitable survival strategy for diaspora literature, to which *A Map of Home* belongs. For it relieves ethnic authors from having to defend (read: from having to idealize) their community. Ethnic humor, thus, can be a liberating force.

If humor at large does not tolerate hierarchies, then the question to be asked is: what is the way through which ethnic humor questions cultural stereotypes?⁵ I agree with Holly that humor does not deny identity labels; it crystallizes them by exaggeration, ridicules their validity, and demythologizes the normality of stereotypes. Yet, as I have established in the introduction, visibility is not the problem. Plus, humor does not resort to an abstract level of perceiving culture, but it questions the very material minutiae in which those stereotypes have been constructed. Not only does humor frame ethnic identity issues for the ethnic groups, but it also “gives an outlet for reacting against discrimination and for battling the frustrations of living within two cultures,” (114) an opportunity which might not be available for them in “real” life. In this case, at least temporarily, ethnic humor enables ethnic people to confront and resist, rather than deny, their identity “issues.” On this topic, Arthur Asa Berger correctly notes that humor in general has a relieving function. It “encourages playfulness and openness, purges us of violent emotions or feelings of excessive guilt, reveals that authority is often invalid, liberates us, helps promote social cohesion, and provides great pleasure” (162). He adds that humor blasphemes various forms of authority. In the same vein, this chapter explores how ethnic humor subverts sacred orthodoxies.

Having shed light on the dynamics of ethnic humor, I now discuss the specific ethnic humor in *A Map of Home*: trickster humor. Using tricksters is a common strategy in ethnic humor literature.⁶

Clarifying the Trickster

Trickster humor has Arab origins. In *Clowns & Tricksters*, Kimberly A.

Christen analyzes the development of trickster figures across various cultures. She notes correctly that the most well-known one in Arabic culture is Juha, “a popular clever fool in folktales throughout many Arab countries from Morocco to Syria Known for his drunkenness, homosexuality, eroticism, satire, and racism . . . [Juha has the] ability to gain insight where others see only laughter. His cleverness is matched by his unrelenting wit, from which no one is safe” (98). While I confirm and agree with Christen that the character of Juha manifests a combination of opposites, and that he is able to perceive things at a deeper level than most folklore characters, I value nationally specific features of Juha based on their country of origin and cultural context. Grouping all Arab trickster figures in one category betrays the most important characteristic that trickster humor induces: heterogeneity. Also, I do not posit common physical descriptions of Juha across Arabic nations, as, for example, “drunkenness, homosexuality, eroticism.” These features do not exist in all versions of Juha. Trickster figures are products of specific cultures.

In his introduction to *Tales of Juha*, Said Yaqtine generalizes grandiosely that “Juha is the representation of the Arab imagination in all eras . . . his anecdotes force us to view ourselves in the mirror of his world (that of laughter), while drawing us, at the same time, toward an ironical view of ourselves” (7). But then, Yaqtine astutely observes that Juha’s “‘idiocy’ sets up an authority in opposition to authoritatively predominant ‘reason’; and its ‘wit’ triumphs over rationalizing ‘idiocy.’ In this lies the distinctiveness of Juha’s character: he is the wisest yet the most simple-minded of

people” (6). My research concurs with Yaqtine. Similarly, Dwight Fletcher Reynolds investigates Juha’s ability to outsmart others, and concludes that he is more than a mere fool, as some might mistakenly think (120-123). As will be highlighted, *A Map of Home*’s use of trickster humor reflects Arab traditions while it reverses a range of key patriarchal polarities without sacrificing cultural specificities.

Here I want to spell out what I do not mean by trickster theory, especially since I work against one of the founding texts, Paul Radin’s *The Trickster*. Like prolific and controversial Ojibwa writer Gerald Vizenor, I am not persuaded by a trickster theory that focuses on deterministic attributes. Following Vizenor, I see tricksters as products and creators of their own culture. I assume that tricksters are responsible for their deeds. Therefore, I disagree with Radin’s classic portrait of the trickster as amoral and childish: “He wills nothing consciously. At all times he is constrained to behave as he does from impulses over which he has no control. He knows neither good nor evil yet he is responsible for both. He possesses no values, moral or social, is at the mercy of his passions and appetites, yet through his actions all values come into being” (ix). I reject Radin’s denial here of the trickster’s intelligence and moral compass. With Vizenor, I perceive trickster narratives and figures as strategies against tragedy and victimization. On this key point, Vizenor observes: “The trickster is never a [normal] narrator, so in stories the trickster must tease the tragic out of piety and victimry” (*Postindian* 20). For my part, I see trickster humor as a mode of liberation from absolutism, orthodoxy, and fixity. I read *A Map of Home*’s use of a trickster figure, Nidali Ammar, as a means of liberating readers as well as characters.

However, I want to qualify Vizenor's standpoint on tricksters' representation of ethnic identities in literature. Vizenor argues that only when we move beyond the urge to represent real historical and political actualities do we perceive new possibilities and multiple truths, "only those who tease memories and create stories come close enough to the ironic humor to know otherwise" (*Postindian Conversations* 19). While I grant Vizenor's claim that ethnic people should not let their tragedies define them, I have problems with his assumption that ethnic writers can avoid not representing their people, and that readers should not look for political messages in ethnic literature.

For instance, I do not think it is possible for twenty-first-century Arab American women writers to produce art for art's sake, because readers approach their literature with a constant eye on their positionality and on the messages they create. This expectation is not simply negative or always bad. For instance, to read *A Map of Home*'s critique of sexual norms without paying attention to the Palestinian-Israeli reference risks reading the novel as a critique of patriarchy within Arab Americans only. This is especially dangerous at the time Arab women and men, women more than men, continue to be written by others.⁷ I am not saying that ethnic writers have to write representational literature, yet I do not want to deny them the choice to develop counter-hegemonic strategies.

Also, I want to comment on Vizenor's definition of tricksters: "The trickster is a language game, a counter causal liberation of the mind, not a salvation or the measure of representation and invented cultural values" (*Manifest Manners* 77). While I, too, see tricksters in literatures as signs, I also view them as a material presences. I find no contradiction between what is "game" and what is not game (representation). It is

important to point out that Vizenor is obviously not against fighting to liberate oneself from social constructs, but he seems to perceive the faculties of representation *and* liberation as necessarily contradictory. Differently, I see no opposition between viewing trickster humor as an aesthetic element *and* as a resistance strategy. Moreover, I do not find a problem in educating the audiences of ethnic literatures. Clearly, Vizenor does not call for a purely imaginative ethnic art. He insists, and I agree, on a personal perspective, not thorough-going objective interpretation, of realities. I believe that my contention with Vizenor lies in what seems to be his underlying assumption that an author may choose to avoid the many causes of cultural construction she is bombarded with. I find this expectation to be too ideal. Yet, I wholeheartedly share Vizenor's perception of tricksters as a means to relieve ethnic authors from having to either idealize or demonize their cultures by inviting them to disrupt the binary oppositions largely adopted by both ethnic and mainstream cultures.

Analyzing the Novel

Jarrar is critical of how Orientalist education essentializes Nidali's mind and body. The novel portrays the apparatus of Western schools as the antithesis of the Arab family. Expressing this opposition humorously, Nidali says: "School was where my parents were not. Teachers were there; they taught us facts based on reality. They weren't supposed to love us, and they didn't. They were English and cold and didn't resemble us at all. I liked this, that they did not hold a mirror up to me. Like some kids felt about play, school was my true escape" (10). Putting Nidali's realistic assessment of Orientalist education in the larger frame of the novel assures the reader that neither education nor family is perfect. One of Nidali's (American) teachers tells the class a

story about an Arab girl who gets killed by her father, and, insensitively, asks Nidali to clarify that not all Arab fathers are as violent. Nidali refuses to either confirm or deny the teacher's statement, because she does not appreciate her reductive and essentialist argument. Also, she resists being perceived as a representative of all Palestinian females. Instead, in a trickster-like fashion, Nidali outsmarts the teacher's deterministic assumption. She explains in detail to her class the colonial traumas to which her father has been exposed. For example, she discusses how, as a Palestinian living in a village in the West Bank, her father has been "completely fucked in '67'" (273). Raising the readers' political awareness in a humorous ways, Jarrar negotiates Orientalist education.

Further, Nidali questions the sickening Western perception of the East as a patriarchal society. She reminds her teacher, who might be experiencing a moment of cultural amnesia, of what has happened to the Palestinians at the hands of Israel. And she stresses the fact that regardless of the repetitive cultural traumas that the Palestinians have been living since the beginning of the Israeli invasion of their lands, she and her family have managed to survive. Such is one moment where *A Map of Home* represents history and edifies its audiences without preaching tragedies. In other words, this is one example of how the novel combines both representation and humor. Despite being faithful to the Palestinian cause, the overall humorous tone of the narrative prevents the reader from taking this scene tragically.⁸

Against the expectation of both school and home, Nidali challenges the status quo. As a young writer, she writes survival humorous narratives, which discuss how "[she] was proud of all the work [she]'d done over the past twelve years of schooling, proud of how well [she]'d done in spite of a war and a huge move" (269). While her

father wants her to develop a model consumer-oriented statement of purpose, which feeds off her “Arabness,” she chooses to write witty personal stories, which “tease” history, to borrow Vizenor’s famous term. She writes various antithetical compositions. For example, in the third composition, “I Come from Crazy Stubborn, Mad Lovin’ Hoes,” she addresses the French invasion of Egypt, the rape of several Egyptian women at the hands of the French colonizers, and the mixed-blooded generations that result from these relationships. Instead of representing an Orientalist version of history, she develops a humorous personal account, which, though truthful, does not claim to represent reality; rather, it seeks to express an individual vision of reality. In other words, she skillfully intertwines the personal and the political. Hers is anything but a documentary history. Her humorous personal narrative disrupts the otherwise tragic stories. Not surprisingly, Nidali’s teacher never returns Nidali’s essay. She claims to have torn it apart and to have flushed it. She complains that Nidali “didn’t do [her] French homework ‘properly.’” (115). The teacher punishes Nidali by putting her in a detention room. Nidali uses the space that is meant for “the school delinquents” (116) for attaining more (sexual) freedom; she takes a break from the constant competition in her class, meets new people, and experiences her first kiss. Liberating Orientalist minds emancipates the Muslim female body.

Israeli Orientalist colonialism oppresses the colonized Muslim female body. Jarrar makes use of humorous scatological discourse to illustrate this point. When Nidali’s family leaves Kuwait and migrates to Egypt, the Israeli soldiers inspect them at the Jordan checkpoint in a humiliating way. Beautifully describing how this inspection renders her mother’s body, as well as her own body, vulnerable and how it exposes their

bodies to the power of colonial females, whom they perceive as a masculine Others, Nidali says: “Mama took off her skirt and blouse . . . she was almost naked, and barefoot. The girl soldier, I noticed, looked like a boy, and I would have assumed she was a boy if it weren’t for her chest. She ran a black machine over Mama’s body, and I felt embarrassed for Mama, naked in front of this rough-handed stranger” (98). Yet, luckily, the novel portrays this weakness of the colonized Oriental female body as something that can be overcome. The body is able to defend itself in its own way. Nidali observes: “Mama farted a huge silent fart that stunk up the fitting room and forced the soldier to leave for a few seconds. We giggled, and Mama said kaffik [hi-five], and I gave her five” (98). Although humor here does not resolve the situation, it offers a (momentary) disruption of the conflict. Plus, it creates a female bond.

As established earlier, *A Map of Home* focuses on secular Arab American Muslims, offering a brief, yet intense, critique of Islamist constructions of the Muslim female body. In the novel, Islamist discourse is mainly symbolized in the character of Esam, Nidali’s (Arab) cousin, who visits them in Kuwait after doing *‘umra*— a voluntary visit to Mecca. In the same fashion, the novel makes fun of the beard as an Islamist icon Esam’s (male) body represents. The text portrays Islamist fabrications of both non-Muslim and Muslim female bodies as negative. Nidali’s mother gives her “Wonder Woman” stickers, which the latter hangs on her room’s walls. Islamist cousin, Esam, becomes angry at Nidali’s admiration for what he sees as an “immodest” woman or a “naked heathen” (52). Esam’s underlying assumption here is that Nidali needs a role model, and that she cannot have “a non-Muslim woman” as one. He judges the sticker based on the outfit the woman in the picture is wearing. I stress the syllable

“out” in “outfit” because both Orientalists and Islamists are obsessed with how the Muslim female body appears in public. In other words, women’s (inner) status is based on an (outer) practice. Operating from a dichotomous mentality, Esam sees in the sticker a representation of the West, which for him is necessarily bad and absolutely different from the East. In rage, he tears apart this “profane” cultural icon. Ironically, his irrational act immortalizes the sticker. Using humor, Nidali tells the readers that in the “sticker’s place white pieces of paper remained where the glue had refused to part with the wall so it appeared as though there were Women of Wonder ghosts all over [her] room, apparitions where she had once stood guard for a long time after she vanished, these white spots were, to [her], parts of god” (53). Islamist essentializing the body leads to chaos.

A Map of Home does not critique Islam; it ridicules patriarchal interpretations of it. Within this frame, the novel discusses dialectics between the Muslim female body and Islam. For example, Nidali’s memorization of some *Quranic* verses negotiates two gender boundaries: space and language. It enables her (female) body to occupy a space that is “normally” reserved for males. Ironically, this negotiation is based on an error. Nidali’s school teacher announces that a *Quran* recitation context is going to take place at another school. He forgets to mention that the competition is exclusive to male students. Thanks to this “screw up,” Nidali becomes able to exist in supposedly male space and to participate in the contest.⁹

Further, this event humorously questions the Arabic language’s absence of gender neutrality. Because the winning certificates are typically designed for male recipients, the headmaster has to change its language to suit a female recipient. Thus, he

has to feminize the possessive pronoun his to “h-er” and the noun *tilmith*, Arabic word for a male student, to *tilmithah*, Arabic word for a female student. This linguistic change, which is caused by the success of the female body in occupying a “male space,” gains the family’s recognition. Looking at the obviously corrected words in the certificate, the mother says the headmaster “is not used to giving little girls certificates.” The father laughs while imagining the headmaster “adjusting the certificate that’s supposed to be for boys” (57). The fact that this liberation comes within, not without, the frame of religion, re-evaluates both Western and Islamist interpretations of the position of women in Islam.¹⁰ Through humor, the novel questions fabricated linguistic and spatial *Quranic* female identities.

One last example of Jarrar’s humorous critique of Islamist patriarchy concerns Nidali’s father who draws the reader’s attention to the fabrication of the body at the hands of a fake Islamic identity. Waheed is not a devout Muslim but pretends to be so for convenience. For example, he consumes alcohol, swears, and gambles, practices that are prohibited in Islam. Plus, he cannot stand the veil and is harsh on Islamist Esam. Also, he prevents Nidali from wearing the veil in the *Quran* contest. Trying to convince him that she wants to adopt the same appearance as the other schoolgirls (she was taking it for fun), he disagrees loudly with her: “Forget these idiots” (50). Yet, he tries to perform while being a religious person so as to preach to his wife about her housework “obligations.” The novel’s trickster humor renders absurd fake and “real” Islamisms.

Demythologizing Stereotypes, Ideologies, Norms

Using language games and mind tricks throughout the novel, typical of trickster figures, the heroine questions the culturally assumed normal association between “being” and “doing.” Consider how she addresses the age old question “Who Am I”: “I’d repeat a question to myself, ‘*ana ana, ana ana, ana ana* [I am]? –Am I am I am I am I am I am I over and over again. When I’d tricked my mind, it would float away, and *I could see that I am just I*. I’d see myself from outside my own mind: my life, my body, and I was not half something and half another, I was one whole, a circle” (58-59; emphasis added). Simple as this language game and exercise of imagination may seem, it significantly problematizes the standard relationship between the signifier and the signified in relation to the self. Nidali Ammar’s omission of the “am” from the normal phrase “I am” shows her resistance of all definite/final interpretations of her individual identity, or to put it in Vizenor’s famous words; it emphasizes her rejection of any “terminal creeds.” Nidali leaves her possibilities open by choosing to not define “I” by “am.” Her creative use of the English pronoun “I” to mean “I am” shows the influence of Arabic culture and Arabic linguistics, for in Arabic, verb “to be” is not used in the present tense; *ana* is equal to “I” as well as “I am.” This is an example of how tricksters, namely Arab trickster Juha breaks the “norms” of one language by comparing it to another. Such a power over language enables Nidali to resist perceiving herself as a mixed-blood or a half-breed, being American-Egyptian-Greek-Palestinian-Jordanian.¹¹ The protagonist’s trickster ways liberate her very being and open onto futures.

A Map of Home’s use of trickster humor instantiates a female “gaze” on the Arab world.¹² Its directed sexual discourse critiques an array of sexual injustices,

particularly mainstream American heteronormativity; American Orientalist sexism; religious orthodoxy; and secular Arab patriarchy (shaped by the contact of Islamism and Orientalism). The novel challenges manufactured boundaries of sexual orientations. As such, it works to demythologize sexual separatism and hierarchies. Jarrar insists that sexual intercourse, as well as discourse, are not taboo; they need to be seen as a means of empowering female sexuality.

A number of reviewers have been disturbed by the novel's sexuality.¹³ Some of their worries originate from the underlying assumption that all Arab American authors have to represent the community in good ways.¹⁴ I, however, hold that if readers question this ethnic ideology, we can see *A Map of Home*'s trickster narrator, Nidali Ammar, as an individual rather than a spokesperson. Here, I agree with Salaita in describing *A Map of Home*'s sexual difference as a healthy way in which the author explores her unique protagonist's sexuality ("Potpourri" 132). Salaita points out that Nidali's sexual identity "along with her background makes her unorthodox in every possible way. Not only does she have a free spirit, but she also fails to conform to any of the typical characteristics inscribed in the categories of sexuality, religion, culture, and gender" (132). Indeed. If we reconsider the necessity to perceive Nidali as either a heroine, a villain, or a representative of all Arabs in diaspora, we will stop worrying about what her sexuality may or may not represent, and we can gain insight into her role as a trickster; in other words, we can embrace the interrelatedness of trickster humor and sexuality in the novel. Suspending the ideological need to represent Arab American community in a certain way opens the door for a more realistic depiction of a constantly changing world through Nidali's liberated lens.

The text challenges constructed borders of sexual stereotypes and discrimination. It stresses sexual inclusiveness, casting the human body and its desires as inclusive and changeable. As a trickster figure, Nidali moves from one “sexual category” to another in a non-linear liberated egalitarian fashion. Jarrar embraces Nidali’s trickster-like transition between masturbation, homosexuality, and heterosexuality. Being a trickster discourse, *A Map of Home* especially ridicules the notions of ideal and romantic sex. Nidali’s emotional, psychological, and sexual “moves” are directly related to her peripatetic lifestyle, true to her trickster character. Significantly, she goes beyond the need to objectively blame history in her life as well as in her (sexual) stories. The heroine’s on-the-edge mutable sexuality is a developed survival strategy that does not consider historical tragedies to be terminal or stereotypes to be mandatory.

Against Radin’s account of the trickster, Nidali is responsible for her sex choices. She enjoys control and agency over her body and self-consciously employs humor. For example, she scorns Orientalist sexist violation coming from one of her white American male classmates. It is a rich scene. Using the second-person pronoun to great effect, she encourages herself to assertively reject his sexual moves as he “force[s] his dick in [her] mouth,” saying, “don’t just sit there and let your nose run and your eyes tear and your throat gag when he does, bite him, bite him and run. . . . When he tells everyone at school you’re a whore and everyone believes him, ignore them. They are nothing. When your father says you’re a whore, ignore him. He can’t even get you guys a house” (245). Extending the humor, she imagines discussing her classmate’s sexual assault with her father:

IF AND WHEN you receive an anonymous letter saying your daughter sucks dicks, don't automatically believe it and beat the shit out of her. She doesn't. She was, technically, raped. She won't tell you this because you're strict. And when you beat her up, for the nine thousandths time, she will dare you to kill her. She doesn't want to live the life you've come all the way to America to give her. (248)

Nidali's multi-faceted rejection of her classmate's sexual desires, the society's manipulation of her reputation, and her father's patriarchal judgment of her sexuality negotiates the crosscurrents of racism, heterosexism, and patriarchy humorously. Her stance is the work of a strong individual determined to survive the crossroads of conflicting cultural norms, stereotypes, and ideologies.

Unlike many feminists, Jarrar does not attack male voyeurism in heterosexual relationships. Instead, she offers a multi-perspectival account that stresses the necessity of female consent and draws our attention to the female gaze at the male gaze. Nidali's sexual involvement, for instance with an Arab boyfriend, Fakhr el-Din, does not prevent her from being conscious of his male gaze. Her acceptance of such a gaze is an act of free choice. In her words: "He watched my face and made me nervous. Then, I enjoyed his audience I came, for the first time, in front of someone else" (199). Jarrar here stages a critique of ubiquitous sexual objectification and a praise of sexual partnership. This reversal of the standard view is part of Nidali's trickster way.

Jarrar's female protagonist and narrator has no romantic illusions about her sexual desires. When asked by her girlfriend whether she misses her boyfriend Fakhr el-Din, Nidali emphasizes that what she really misses is "kissing—not him, per se, but the act itself, like one who goes hungry not for a certain food in particular but for food in general" (198). Here I agree with Jess Hoffmann's astute interpretation of sexual "normativity" as redefined in *A Map of Home*: "normal, Jarrar and Nidali know,

includes a bisexual, hyperimaginative, masturbating-on-the-bidet, funny-as-hell, brainiac ‘fourteen-year-old Arab chick’” (61). Responding to her interviewer Hoffmann’s interpretation, Jarrar declares, “I think Nidali is a breath of fresh air. She speaks her mind, and is completely honest about her body, her thoughts, her family, and her culture” (61). The novel’s humor encourages sexual inclusiveness and liberation from sexual norms.

Typical of trickster discourses, *A Map of Home* is critical of sexual uniformity and censorship. Its acceptance of lesbianism is a case in point for Arab American literature. Salaita draws our attention to the fact that Jarrar is “one of the first Arab American novelists to treat this theme seriously” (*Modern Arab American Fiction* 132). The novel offers a strong humorous critique of the social hypocrisy of Arabic culture, which allows women to practice everything with each other except sex.¹⁵ By the same token, it criticizes Arabic media’s censorship of Western eroticism. Hilariously, Nidali describes someone who censors media materials as a “kiss-cutter” (70). Misconstruing this very description, Nidali’s father rhetorically asks: “You have to be a real ass to have that job, right?” (70) He confuses ass kisser with kiss cutter. Nidali expresses her hatred for sexual homogeneity as follows: “I hated . . . uniforms and the possibility of being called a lesbian” (190). The text rejects policing sexuality either through labeling or expurgating, ideology, or stereotypes.

Questioning Authorities, Imaging Alternatives

Confused Muslim female sexuality is a dominant topic in contemporary Arab American literature. Employing humor, Jarrar offers a secular solution: accepting multiple sexual modalities. Lesbianism is one of her heroine's trickster strategies to overcome sexual, as well as, cultural displacement. For instance, when Jiji, Nidali's girlfriend in Egypt, asks her whether she misses home or not, Nidali refuses to be reduced to a mere diasporic figure. She shifts Jiji's essentialist question to a more tangible discourse. She reminds Jiji that she does not have to practice her first-time kiss with a boyfriend and instead shows her how to kiss. The physical "space" between herself and Jiji enables her to reconnect with another (geographical) space, home. Besides the character-based tricksterism which leads to the negotiation of sexual boundaries, this sex scene as a whole has a trickster-like function in the narrative: it disrupts a moment of potential self-victimization. This shows how Nidali imagines her colonial, racist, and patriarchal reality in an alternative way.

In this vein, the novel praises masturbation as one alternative way in which the Muslim female body fills not only its biological needs but also shows its diasporic adaptation. To explain, Nidali develops strategies for masturbating in order to suit her new living conditions in the US. Describing the difference between the Eastern and the Western contexts for masturbation, Nidali explicates in characteristically wily trickster terms:

Eventually, I discovered that one could lie on her back in the tub and extend her feet up the wall so that the faucet would be perpendicular to her tummy, and let the water gather into her crotch for mind-blowing orgasms. The only downside to this was if one's mama puts a load of laundry in the washing machine, one's

orgasm was instantly and irreversibly ruined by the sensation that one's crotch was engulfed by roaring flames. Also, one could develop power issues orgasming in the tub: in a bidet, the girl is on top, but in America, where one has to do it in the bath, one is on the bottom, and so is always dominated. (217)

Beyond the overt sexual and political symbol of who is “on top” and who is “on the bottom,” the narrative moment at which this scene occurs adds to its subtle significance. This scene immediately follows the family's arrival to the US and their realization that not only will they live in diaspora but they will also have to reside in a trailer, because the father cannot afford buying a regular house. Motivated by her desire to survive, Nidali disrupts this tragic “pose,” to use one of Vizenor's famous words, by redirecting the reader's attention to an alternative sexual discourse.¹⁶ Thus, she is able to disregard her conditions and the ideologies surrounding her. Instead of viewing this difficult moment as a representation of cultural and political displacement or confinement, she sees it as a “chance” to imagine and create stories. Also, the teenage vernacular—tummy, mind-blowing, roaring flames, power issues—enforce the humor here and throughout the novel.

The fact that Nidali reaches puberty and has her first menstrual period in diaspora during an imposed journey from Kuwait to Egypt in a village called “*al-Rahhaliya*,” Arabic word for “travelers,” emphasizes the novel's “both/and” rhetoric, which embraces sudden maturity and transnational identity. In a trickster-like manner, Nidali questions the sacred authority of Arab rulers. She writes a letter to Saddam Houssein in which she humorously yet sharply attacks him for conquering Kuwait thus for preventing her from enjoying her dawning sexuality. And she ridicules him for ignoring the (hetero) sexual pleasure of young people. Her letter reads:

Dear Mr. Saddam Houssein . . . I am bleeding in my panties and too embarrassed to make the caravan pull over . . . [W]hen you decided to invade the country where I grew up (and when you decided this, sir, were you on some seriously strong hashish?) did you, at any point, stop and consider the teenage population? Did you stop and consider how many of them were dying, just dying for summer to be over and school to restart, for classes to resume and crushes to pick up where they left off in June? For your information, I was anxiously awaiting to see a certain Fakhr el-Din. A very handsome, sarcastic, 9th year student. I had kissed him a couple of times by the dry-freeze animals in the school entrance, and I've since been making out with my left hand, but it's not the same. He was supposed to be my boyfriend this year, but that's scrapped now, thanks to you. I hate your fucking guts. I wish you nothing less than violent anus-expansion, via rocket ships launched from close proximity, and I hope that you too will be expelled from your home and forever cut off from your crush and sentenced by almighty Allah to eternity in the final circle of hell where you will forever make out with your left hand, the skin of which will burn off and re-grow for all of eternity. (155-156; emphasis in original)

Clear in this hilarious trickster discourse is a challenge of dominant authority particularly through the use of language that refers to body parts and body actions in a self-consciously grotesque and obscene way so as to shatter the illusion of the manufactured fear of the ruler.¹⁷ It is trickster humor that disallows a string of colonial tragedies from victimizing the protagonist. The trickster develops alternative sexual strategies.

Besides questioning normal sexual activities (homosexual/ heterosexual/ masturbation), *A Map of Home* defies “standard” sexual roles such as the normal female role in a normal heterosexual relation through the employment of trickster humor. The heroine has no idealistic notions about what sex is. Nor does she abide by the inherited social norms that discourage her from having her own view of sex. Consider one of her sexual encounters with Fakhr el-Din:

He kissed me . . . but didn't touch my breasts. I rubbed them against his bare brown chest but he didn't get the hint. I waited a few weeks, then, half way through the summer, when he still hadn't touched them, I grabbed his right hand and placed his palm over my left nipple. This seemed to open a floodgate. . . . I

eased his hands out and told him I was used to water, and when he looked confused, I told him about the bidet. “I’m competing with a bidet?” he said. “No, just with water. Water is gentle and falls very consistently. That’s what you have to be. Consistent and gentle.” (199)

Clearly, Jarrar insists on dramatizing how her female protagonist exercises sexual empowerment in an array of colorful scenes. Nidali’s independence in sexual relations questions mainstream Islamist and Orientalist assumptions of the passivity of Arab and Muslim women in sex.

Interrogating Virginity

Through trickster humor, *A Map of Home* undermines manufactured codes of honor in Arab cultures. Attending her aunt’s wedding in Alexandria, Nidali critiques the inherited value of virginity as explained to her by her older Egyptian female cousin Layla. I observe that the manner in which Layla educates Nidali about virginity exemplifies what Arthur Asa Berger calls “[r]hetorical exuberance,” which refers to “a technique of humor that derives its power from its extravagance” (25). This narrative scene parodies the grotesque way that patriarchal discourses, dominant in many Arab societies, perceive female virginity (18). Layla, who seems to be completely interpellated by Arab patriarchy, repeats a cliché common in Arab cultures: a hymen is like a match; it may be lit only one time. Unlike Layla, Nidali’s “borderland” identity and her “in-betweenness,” to use Gloria Anzaldúa’s and Homi Bhabha’s apt terms, respectively, enable her to question an orthodox body of knowledge about virginity. The situation as usual ends humorously, with the groom spilling (red) hibiscus in the bride’s lap. This incident culminates with the bride cursing God. Orthodoxy begets blasphemy. Who better than Nidali to note this turn.

Tricksterism in the novel becomes most memorable in a scene where Nidali strategizes to lose her virginity to her classmate Medina. The intercourse scene that leads to the loss of Nidali's virginity mixes humor and pain. Medina has just broken up with his Latin American girlfriend. Likewise, Nidali has recently "broken up," so to speak, with the faucet; therefore, they are both on the rebound. She asks him to have sex with her, but he is reluctant at the beginning because he has no feelings toward her. Being rejected does not stop Nidali from pursuing him, though with a trick. While visiting him, she gets bitten by a wasp and is in pain. She uses this suffering to convince him to have sex with her in order to help her get rid of her unwanted virginity. She says: "You wouldn't let me die a virgin, would you?" (272). Explaining the success of her "mission," she says: "I sat over him, took his hand and rocked it back and forth over my clit until I could let go and he could guess the rhythm himself" (275). While crying and apologizing to her, perhaps because he regrets having had sex with someone he does not love or for having broken her hymen, she, void of any romantic notions, gets ready to leave. She wonders, "How to tell him that I didn't need him to be sorry, that I needed him to help me find my underwear" (275). She does not experience remorse after this intercourse; rather she says "I felt free, unburdened, but I was also scared and in pain" (276). With a trick, Nidali liberates her body from the burden of having to stay a virgin in order for her to be a "good" Arab woman.

The theme of loss of virginity in the novel questions patriarchal definitions of female virginity. Complaining about the father's obsession with her virginity, Nidali says: "As cool and open-minded as my baba claimed to be, he wanted me to stay a virgin, to stay 'good.' He didn't ever use the word virgin, he used the word 'girl.' He

wanted me to stay a girl because he didn't want me to be a woman" (258). She makes fun of his use of paternalistic discourse especially when he defines what is or is not sexually normal in Arab society, reciting, "we don't have boyfriends" (16). Nidali's humorous discourse here ridicules the father's judgment of his daughter as a "whore" because she comes home late, even when she is reading in the library. In a matter-of-fact sarcastic tone, Nidali describes her father's inexplicable behavior as follows: "He comes home and screams at his daughter, who is turning into a slut, he's sure of it" (243). For him, virginity entails more than abstaining from having sex; it necessitates behaving in a way commonly accepted by Arab society. Yet Nidali does not abide by such male-headed rules. Instead, she threatens to report her father's abuse to the police, knowing that parents in the US do not have full authority over their daughters (or sons). In this case, the trickster outwits social institutions to free herself from acquired definitions of the good virgin woman.

The theme of virginity has other dimensions explored in the novel. In one scene it deconstructs, for example, the prevailing Orientalist perceptions of Arab mother-daughter discourse concerning the female body. In an abrupt, humorous, and dense scene, the mother wakes Nidali up and asks her whether or not she has had sex: "Tell me the truth, you've had sex?" (277) Again, Nidali outmaneuvers this cultural discourse, that is, she responds to the cultural premise behind the question, and not the question, stating "I'm not a virgin." She addresses the whole cultural construction of virginity. Here, I find useful Jacques Derrida's choice of the word "pucelage" to depict virginity. In a footnote, Derrida explains "pucelage" as "the more earthy [more than "virginity"] French word for the actual physical fact of sexual intactness, in the female

the membrane itself” (150). Within the parameters of this definition, Nidali loses her virginity only after she has had complete sexual intercourse, that is to say, only after she loses her hymen. Given inherited Arab views of female virginity, exploring sex in ways that do not break the hymen does not eliminate virginity. Very abruptly, the mother states, “I love you, still Good night.” (277). No questions asked. The shock effect resulting from this minimalist discourse awakens the reader to a long set of assumptions the mother chooses not to discuss such as Arab evaluation of virginity and pre-marital sex. The absence of expected mother-daughter discourse marks, in fact, the presence of strong criticism from Jarrar of the Arab definition of virginity.

Also, although on a more economical scale (less is more), the novel critiques sovereign religious power exercised over the female body and sexuality. Contemplating the exercise of sovereign power on the body, to borrow Michel Foucault’s terms, Nidali admits trickster-style, “I briefly pondered whether I would go to hell. But then I decided that God would not have created beautiful men like Medina, or wasps, or premaritally breakable hymens, if it were God’s intention to throw me in hell” (276).¹⁹ Thus, through the critique of divine as well as patriarchal power concerning female sexuality, the novel renders dubious the economy of flesh-based virginity.

Solidifying the Status Quo

Alas, the picture is not completely bright. For while *A Map of Home*’s trickster humor critiques socially constructed codes of sexuality, it does not criticize the binary manufacture of gender; rather the novel entertains rigid biological differences between males and females. Clearly, it critiques the cultural valuation of sex; for example,

parodying the gender formation of favoring males to females, Nidali proclaims at one early point, “‘I’m gonna be the best boy,’ I spat out.” (22). Here Jarrar subverts not femininity per se, but the social “effeminate” perception of femininity. The novel questions the internalization of the social fabrication of gender. But it keeps in place the masculine/ feminine binary conceptualization.

Also, the disruptions of sexual orientations and boundaries in *A Map of Home* are not without problems. In one scene, the novel presents as necessary the integration of “auto-eroticism” and “hetero-eroticism,” to borrow Derrida’s words, who does not view masturbation or “onanism” at large as a model of narcissistic vice and self-preservation. Derrida convincingly argues that “alteration [between the actual presence of the self and the imagined presence of the other] does not simply happen to the self . . . it is the self’s very origin” (153). Right after Nidali’s sexual encounter with Fakhr el-Din, she “ran straight to the bathroom and sat over the bidet until [her] thighs went numb” (199). While this course of events stages a successful critique of linear and singular perceptions of sex, in another scene, the novel operates from an unconscious assumption that masturbation is of secondary importance. For instance, Nidali regrets having to go back to masturbation and having masturbated before meeting Fakhr el-Din as such: “His [Medina’s] tongue made the tub faucet seem like such a waste of time” (274). Still, *A Map of Home* loosens the linearity and the singularity of a female sex life.

Problematic in the novel is the absence of details about male sexual pleasure. I worry that the nonexistence of mutual sexual pleasure might in fact re-inscribe the phallogentrism it critiques. Nidali might be occupying a phallic position. In an early scene, Nidali’s partner does not experience any climatic sexual pleasure. Nidali’s sexual

conquests co-opt, if ambiguously, male dominance. Clearly, my few final criticisms do not take away from the substantial feminist cultural value Randa Jarrar's *A Map of Home* represents.

Through its use of what I read as trickster humor in relation to Arab American Muslim female sexuality, *A Map of Home* contributes to the ongoing battle against the social production and reproduction of the normative Muslim female body. Contemporary Arab American women writers may use humor to disrupt established cultural mythologies associated with the Muslim female body.

Chapter Four

Class-Body Discourse in Samia Serageldin's *The Cairo House* (2000)

This chapter discusses the ways in which Egyptian American writer Samia Serageldin's semi-autobiographical historical fiction, *The Cairo House*, inscribes nationalist and Islamist depictions of the Muslim female body from an upper-class perspective. The chapter dramatizes how the 1952 Egyptian revolution, the historical framework of *The Cairo House*, prompts historical changes, while formulating classist, nationalist, and Islamist constructions of the Muslim female body. The novel's delineation of post-1952 chaos and its portrayal of the flourishing of Islamism in Anwar Sadat's Egypt are prophetic of 2011 and subsequent Egyptian uprisings. To this point, *The Cairo House* has received little attention beyond the scope of its hyphenated identities.¹ Compared to other Arab American novels with which this dissertation deals, *The Cairo House* is the most embedded in the Arab world. I argue that in the novel social class represents a mediating force between how history is read and how the body is written. Advocating an elitist, ahistorical, and apolitical feminism, *The Cairo House's* representation of the Muslim female body is tellingly tendentious.

Although the novel deals with an earlier historical period (1952 to 1990), a crucial middle-to-late twentieth-century moment, and discusses particular geographical situations, Egyptian, Egyptian American, and Egyptian British diasporas, the body issues it exposes help us understand the development of contemporary Islamism and nationalism, both of which contribute to the making of the Muslim female body in the twenty-first century. In other words, the novel's historical background does not conflict

with Arab American women's present, for even though the events it narrates seem distant, the issues that contemporary Arab American Muslim women confront in relation to institutionally and ideologically constructed meanings of marriage, femininity, sexuality, public space, voice/ silence, and the veil still hold sway.

In studying the historical context of *The Cairo House*, this chapter follows the path treaded by a number of Arab American critics. Looking at two memoirs, Joe Kadi's *Thinking Class* (1996) and Edward Said's *Out of Place* (1999), for example, Carol Fadda-Conrey analyzes the counter-history that these two texts present in reaction to mainstream American fabrications of Arab identities. Fadda-Conrey argues convincingly that to employ "literature as a means to counter the silence that shrouds the experiences of ethnic minorities in the US is to claim an authorship [which signifies] not only the capacity to speak but the belief that speech—or literary representation—is also a claiming of political and social agency" (137). In a parallel fashion, my reading of *The Cairo House* shows that this semi-autobiography is political. However, my analysis of the ways in which Serageldin writes back, primarily to Egyptian nationalism and Islamism, problematizes the dominant assumption, to which Fadda-Conrey seems to subscribe: writing a memoir is in and of itself an act of political agency (I am particularly interested in feminist agency).

Through analyzing interwoven personal and communal feminist themes presented in *The Cairo House*, I focus on the alternative historical model Serageldin's narrative presents. I argue that the novel's portrayal of the construction of the Muslim female body is best understood through an understanding of the author's aristocratic historical standpoint. Still, *The Cairo House* is an example of both history from below

and history from above, i.e., it offers an account of marginalized history and mainstream history simultaneously, for although Serageldin writes from a position of class privilege, she represents a politically disenfranchised group of elite Egyptian women who have lost power because of the 1952 Egyptian revolution, a typical yet often ignored example of marginalization. Here, of course, nationalism and Islamism shape Serageldin's readings of history and, thus, her writings of the body.

Social class is the least highlighted identity marker in the scholarship on 21st-century Arab American literature.² Observing this lack, Nadine Naber notes: "Despite the fact that many Arab American feminists use the framework of 'intersectionality' (which tends to refer to the links among race, class, and gender), there has been little written on socioeconomic class" (244).³ By scrutinizing social class identities as related to the female body in Serageldin's *The Cairo House*, one of a few Arab American texts that deal with social class, I aim to extend the existing discussion of heterogeneous Arab American feminisms.

In structuring this chapter, I follow a thematic trajectory covering the writer and the novel; historical fiction theorized; *The Cairo House* as an atypical historical novel; social class theory and practice; a number of body-related issues, namely marriage and family, femininity, space, sexuality, and the veil; the discourse of sexuality; and valences of the veil.

The Writer and the Novel

Serageldin identifies as an immigrant writer who dwells in two worlds and holds multiple identities.⁴ She was born and raised in Cairo to an aristocratic and political family (her uncle, Seif-el-Islam, was one of the *Pashas*⁵ before 1952 Egyptian revolution), which was persecuted under the Nasser regime. She left for London in her twenties, where she got her Master's degree in Political Science from the University of London. She now lives in Chapel Hill and moves between the US, Britain, and Egypt.⁶ Serageldin's oeuvre encompasses two novels, *The Cairo House* (2000)⁷ and *The Naqib's Daughter* (2009), plus a collection of short stories, *Love is Like Water* (2009). She has contributed several essays on Arab American writings, women in Islam, and Islamic cultures, for example, to *In the Name of Osama Bin Laden: Global Terrorism and the Bin Laden Brotherhood* (2002) and *Muslim Networks from Hajj to Hip Hop* (2005). She regularly gives public speeches on current Middle Eastern issues. Serageldin's writings have been extensively anthologized.

The author perceives herself and her heroine as "chameleon-like figures," who occupy different positions and who are able to develop multiple and dynamic survival strategies, depending on the contexts in which they are put. Significantly, she defines herself as being "American" first and "Muslim" second.⁸ Readers of *The Cairo House* learn that the author knows Arabic, English, and French. In an interview with Maysa Abou-Youssef Hayward, Serageldin comments on the language of her writing and the literary and cultural role she plays as an immigrant writer:

the choice of language of expression, for a diaspora writer in general, is significant on positioning the writer on one side or the other of the cultural

divide between the old country and the new one, and in defining his or her ‘ideal reader.’ Language is also an entire codification of cultural and cultural inhibitions, and for some writers, myself included, that is a factor. But regardless of the language, the “hyphenated” writer brings a unique perspective to literature: that of the insider/ outsider. It is the ability to see with bifocal vision that is the privilege, and the pitfall, of a transitional identity. (88)

Also in “The Coming Out of the Chameleon,” Serageldin elaborates, using the image of the chameleon, that her choice to write in English is shaped by her addressees, multiple locations, and audiences. The fact that the novel is originally written in English, translated to ten languages, one of which is Arabic, points to Serageldin’s actual audiences.⁹ Not unlike the majority of contemporary Arab American women’s literary works, *The Cairo House* consistently gazes back at the East.

On the novel’s treatment of history, Mona Mikhail argues that “there are clearly two trajectories along which the novel moves: a quest to retrieve or re-visit the past, and an attempt to assess the present of an expatriate re-planted in the/a new world” (516). I agree that *The Cairo House* invests in both the past and the present, but I argue that these explorations are neither equal nor objective; the text clearly adopts a conservative reading of history. The politics that *The Cairo House* represents is manifested in a dominant nostalgic tone.

There are four main motifs in the novel. Serageldin emphasizes them in her interview with Hayward: “the chameleon,” “the palimpsest,” “the kaleidoscope,” and “Khamaseen winds,” strong desert storms in Egypt (87). The chameleon is a synecdoche for hyphenated identities. The novel suggests different definitions of the chameleon, but the one that is emphasized the most refers to living in two worlds and developing survival and adaptation strategies. To me, it is more of an amphibian than a chameleon. This is applicable to both the author and the heroine. Serageldin explains to

Hayward: “The successful chameleon is at home in more than one culture but never to the point of losing the ability to observe with an outsider’s fresh eye while processing the observation with an insider’s insight” (88). “The palimpsest” signifies the multiplicity of “layers,” which both the writer and the female protagonist experience. She sees the “kaleidoscope” as a “metaphor for life,” in which “an almost imperceptible shift can alter the course of one’s destiny” (87). The “Khamaseen,” severe desert storms which disturb the city’s normal calm character, reminds Serageldin of “Islamic fundamentalism” (88). In that regard, she says, “The image of Khamaseen winds, the unpredictable, but inevitable, ‘fifty day storms’ that sweep out of the desert and lay the city under siege came to mind when I thought of the atavistic forces of Islamic fundamentalism in Egypt” (87-88).

The Cairo House begins in 1961 when the heroine, Gihan Shamel, is nine. The novel covers the period from the 1952 Egyptian revolution to the 90s. It narrates the heavily politicized personal life of Gihan Shamel/ Samia Serageldin. The heroine’s, not unlike the author’s, family’s possessions are confiscated after the 1952 Egyptian revolution. Both the Cairo house and its residents are put under surveillance. After the 1952 Land Reform Acts, the lands of the wealthy Egyptians were confiscated and distributed among the *Fellaheen* (agricultural laborers).¹⁰ Most of the novel is set in Cairo, particularly in the Cairo House, which refers to the house of Gihan’s uncle. Some parts of the novel take place in the US and Europe, the main diasporic locales to which the heroine moves, and Saudi Arabia, where the heroine’s first husband gets a job.

The novel begins with a scene in which Gihan is on a plane going from the US to Egypt for the first time after many years of not being able to visit home, for fear that

her mother might lose custody of Khaled, Gihan's son from her first husband, Youssef Zeitouni. It ends with a scene in which Gihan is going to the airport to join in the US her second husband, Luc, the nephew of her French-speaking governess Madame H el ene. Gihan's diasporic experience is the result of tightly interrelated personal and political reasons that are connected to the Egyptian Personal Status Laws (especially divorce laws, married women travel rules, and custody articles), as well as the rise of nationalism and Islamism in the eras of Gamal Abdel Nasser (president of Egypt from 1956 to 1970) and Anwar El Sadat (president of Egypt from 1970 till his assassination in 1981).

Historical Fiction Theorized

Linda Hutcheon refers to history and fiction as two "modes of writing" (105), which share subjective readings of history. Hutcheon notes major points of similarities between these two modalities of discourse:

derive their force more from verisimilitude than from any objective truth; they are both identified as linguistic constructs, highly conventionalized in their narrative forms, and not at all transparent either in terms of language or structure; and they appear to be equally intertextual, deploying the texts of the past within their own complex textuality. (105)

Both genres represent plausible portrayals of realities, interrelated language narratives, and actions from subjectivities. The core of Hutcheon's argument is that the boundaries between history and fiction are blurred, and these two categories reflect multiple truths, as opposed to one single Truth. History and fiction are social constructs in the sense that they have no pure, natural, or apolitical existence; they do not exist in a vacuum. They constitute "cultural sign systems, ideological constructions whose ideology includes their appearance of being autonomous and self-contained" (112). I agree that there is

little difference between history and fiction: fiction is partly historical and history is fairly fictional. They are products of language discourse.¹¹ Textual separatism is an illusory.

Similarly, Katherine Cooper and Emma Short correctly stress that history and fiction are narratives. Neither is more hierarchically important nor necessarily more real. In the same vein, Diana Wallace demythologizes the binarism between history and fiction, pointing out key emancipating results that happen when readers move away from assumptions that history feeds fiction with truth. Wallace explains how shattering this stereotype has enabled marginalized authors to rewrite their own counter-history through fiction and offer political intervention:

The recognition that history, if it is not precisely “fiction”, is a form of narrative which has much in common with fiction, has been extremely liberating for women and postcolonial writers over the past couple of decades. Having been left out of traditional historical accounts, fiction has allowed them to re-insert themselves into history in a variety of ways, and in doing so they have also reshaped our sense of history itself. (212)

Clearly, Wallace invites readers to consider different narratives of history and to question what their built-in definitions of normal history/true history/ mainstream history and history by enfranchised writers lead to. I support this project.

By the same token, Jerome de Groot argues that historical fiction writers are able to express local issues on national and transnational levels in an interconnected way:

The historical novel . . . might be seen as a tool for national self-definition, and to work globally as a form and locally in terms of the effect of its content. In modern critical and sociological terms, this has been defined as “glocalisation,” describing the interaction of the local with the international. The historical novel is part of the typology of nationhood and helps to define what Benedict Anderson terms the ‘imagined communities’ of countries. (94)

De Groot, like Wallace, points out ways in which historical fiction has helped women who constitute examples of disenfranchised writers articulate their oppression. Studying different historical novels, de Groot, in addition, analyzes the representation of women based on their class: “Historical fiction has often sought to explain the experience of those on the margins, and, in particular, to deal with the grim lives of women. These novels demonstrate the ways that patriarchy ignores, violently controls or represses the desires of women, be they aristocrats or beggars” (157). I agree with de Groot’s argument about the oppression of women and his discussion of the role historical fiction has played in foregrounding patriarchy and sexism. My reading of *The Cairo House* extends this description of historical fiction and filters it through a lens of social class.

The Cairo House as an Atypical Historical Novel

It is in light of these accounts of the relationship between history and fiction that I read *The Cairo House*. The novel’s representation of the Muslim female body is best understood within frames of historical fiction and the author’s point of view. Not different from the novel genre, *The Cairo House* does not offer an objective but rather a particular representation of the historical events it unfolds. Voicing the experience of what it sees as the disempowered and the emasculated, *The Cairo House* critiques a large number of institutions, ideologies, and individuals, for example, Nasser’s projects of socialism and nationalism; Sadat’s open-door economy; Islamism; to a lesser extent, the pre-revolution regime; and Nasser, Sadat, and Farouk as political figures. Oddly, the text does not offer any critiques of Mubarak’s regime.

Unlike critic Mona Mikhail, I do not expect *The Cairo House* to provide readers with factual data to contextualize the historical events it addresses. Mikhail complains:

[O]ne wishes that the author had commented more on the complex political scene in Egypt today which makes possible such bizarre occurrences [here, she refers to two events: the assassination of Egyptian writer Youssef Sebai and the public divorce of Abu Zaid, another Egyptian writer, from his wife due to his criticism of Islamic discourse]. Indeed, better use of these incidents could have added historical depth and texture to the narrative. (516)

Although I can see Mikhail's point regarding the lack of context, my reading of *The Cairo House* as a historical narrative appreciates the fact that Serageldin does not attempt an inclusive picture of history. I embrace the novel's narrow aristocratic class perspective of Nasser's era and of modern Egyptian history in general. Although the novel adopts a particular feminist history as one side of the historical truth,¹² this is not problematic: it represents the strength of the novel.

Different from much postmodern historical fiction, which emphasizes pluralities as a means to destabilize history,¹³ *The Cairo House* does not employ a multiplicity of voices. It does not use heteroglossia. More relevantly to my topic, the novel offers one historical trajectory of body construction; its classist representations of history determine its stance on the body. It operates from the unspoken assumption that the past (pre-revolution period) is better. This is a standpoint of political and cultural conservatism.

Also, unlike much women's historical fiction, *The Cairo House* does not employ the subject of sexuality as a means to an end. Wallace makes the observation that several women writers of historical novels present the sexuality of their female protagonists strategically, mainly to position this topic in governing historical contexts.

Wallace identifies a further strategic use of the theme of sexuality: making historical themes seem more appealing to contemporary readers. In this context, *The Cairo House*'s muted discourse on sexuality is atypical within the genre of women's historical fiction. Though Serageldin is critical of the cultural silencing of female sexuality and of the dominant fear of homosexuality, the ways in which she voices sexualities are not void of problems. In any case, *The Cairo House* shares many but not all characteristics of historical fiction.¹⁴

Social Class: Theory and Practice

In this section, I use as a framework Bourdieu's habitus theory, which is in tune with Egyptian writer Magda S. Baraka's historiographical analysis of upper-class culture in 50s and 60s Egypt, to read Serageldin's representation of social class. However, prior to analyzing the social class culture that *The Cairo House* portrays, I briefly discuss how another significant contemporary Arab American writer, Joe Kadi, addresses social class in relation to the Muslim female body. By mounting this context, I aim to put Serageldin's discussion of body-class issues in dialogue with one of the few Arab American writers who write on the subject of class.

Kadi,¹⁵ a transgender and queer writer and activist, whose writings deal with lower social class life, identifies as a "cultural worker" (*Thinking Class* 236). Kadi's definition of culture is broad enough to encompass both material and abstract details; it includes both "low" and "high" culture as culture. For example, Kadi views family's food making, grandmother's storytelling, and belly dancing as culture. Critical of mainstream American cultural ideologies, Kadi operates from the assumption that

“high” culture, à la Matthew Arnold, offers only a partial definition of culture. Instead, Kadi aims to develop a more inclusive definition, in which popular culture, à la Raymond Williams, plays a crucial part in building a whole fabric.

In their works, Kadi and Serageldin perceive and write the female body differently. On the level of content, while in *The Cairo House*, Serageldin is preoccupied with delineating the upper-class female body, in *Thinking Class* Kadi analyzes key examples of the physical harms which dominantly fall the lower-class female body. Sexual abuse, physical overwork, and the male privileged uncensored access to the body of poor women are at the heart of Kadi’s discussion. Kadi writes about an American social class experience, which allows class mobility yet “Others” Arabs. Serageldin represents an Arab social class environment that is more static and conservative. Speaking of form, Kadi uses language that is accessible to non-academics, who seem to be the primary audience.¹⁶ Serageldin’s discourse does not make her work accessible to an average Egyptian reader, mainly because it is written in English, with many French words and with references to world literature. Though both writers deal with historical traumas inscribed on the Muslim female body, Kadi expresses her body narratives more intimately, voicing personal experiences fearlessly, resisting while pondering traumas.¹⁷ I read Kadi’s as a collectively therapeutic narrative. Serageldin, however, adopts a much more culturally Olympian approach which sees the past as a better time before the trauma of the revolution.

The difference between Kadi and Serageldin can be best explained through Bourdieu’s comparison between “commoners” and “aristocrats” that are losing their status (*Distinction* 111). While the former looks forward to any change which future

social class identities might bring, the latter reenacts the past to recreate a known upper-class culture:

In contrast to upwardly mobile individuals or groups, “commoners” of birth or culture who have their future, i.e., their being, before them, individuals or groups in decline endlessly reinvent the discourse of all aristocracies, essentialist faith in the eternity of natures, celebration of tradition and the past, the cult of history and its rituals, because the best they can expect from the future is the return of the old order, from which they expect the restoration of their social being. (111)

One group has nothing to lose and so it tries out new class identities daringly, while the other takes calculated conservative steps to revive the past, which it sees as the proper nature of things. This is the mode of conservative readings of class history to which Serageldin gravitates.

Bourdieu’s theory of habitus is broadly applicable to the class environment of *The Cairo House*. It explains the cause-and-effect relationship between class as socioeconomic culture and a life style, especially its unconscious rituals.¹⁸ Basically, habitus is a product of material social class conditions, including, yet not limited to, the economic status of the class member. Metaphorically, I see habitus as mandatory “yeast.” Perpetuating a class membership necessitates *living* that class, i.e., enacting and embodying the class’s defining rules. These are necessary conditions for activating the “yeast.” In other words, the class member has to practice or enact class. Such completed practices (completed in the sense that they are predefined by class, so they are predetermined products from the past have another more “active” role) act as “structuring structures;” they determine further larger rules or practices, which by virtue of repetitions and regularity, formulate the class unconscious. Over time, they create a “logic of practice,” i.e., their legitimacy is no longer questioned (either by members or

non-members). Thus, habitus begins as a set of man-made micro rules, which then becomes natural law and unconscious behavior. Such a “law” presents itself as ahistorical—while in reality, not only is it manufactured by (past) history, but also it produces (future) history in an endless way—and apolitically. Significantly, the very powers that govern a habitus hide behind a face of common-sense.¹⁹

Bourdieu’s argument about habitus can be related to Foucault’s stance on macro as well as micro power.²⁰ In the novel, maintaining aristocratic lifestyles has to be done through the exercise of everyday power over the Muslim female body. This power enables habitus not only to cope with but also to survive traumas. Habitus “tends to protect itself from crises and critical challenges by providing itself with a milieu to which it is as pre-adapted as possible, that is, a relatively constant universe of situations tending to reinforce its dispositions by offering the market most favourable to its products” (61). The questions to be asked now are (1) what characterizes social class in 1950s Egypt? (2) What is the role of gender in this class context?

The Cairo House’s Reflections of Social Class in Egypt

Adopting a sociological approach, Egyptian writer Magda Baraka’s *The Egyptian Upper Class Between Revolutions 1919-1952*, correctly describes social class in Egypt, especially within that period, as a strong and defining identity marker. Baraka sees the members of a specific social class as being a “status group” (6), which takes into account “economic variables,” (7) or what Bourdieu calls class “conditions of existence” (*Logic of Practice* 53), but which does not “fit the strict Marxist condition of ‘ownership of the means of production’” (7). Like Bourdieu, Baraka argues that historical languages and cultural capital constitute classes: class is not defined merely

by materialist possessions, but more largely by cultural possessions. It is the sum of social practices (13). Clearly, Baraka, too, views social class as a construct. She explains that class mobility in Egypt is not as easy as it is in the “West,” and that the power of class exclusion is sturdier in Egypt. For example, she argues that the social status of wealthy Egyptians “is confirmed and enhanced by extra-economic status determinants such as family and education. Extra-economic variables help both to establish an internal hierarchy of status within the class and to set barriers of entry to others” (7). Significant to the Egyptian social class system is the duration for which money has existed in one’s family, as Baraka correctly observes “[t]he time dimension is an extra-economic variable of great importance” (7).

It is in light of such social class particularities that I examine Serageldin’s history and her writing of the body. In the context of Egyptian social class, though one might not have the economics of a rich person, he/she can still be seen as an aristocratic based on objects which belong to another timeframe. For example, living in an aristocratic neighborhood, in which one happens to have resided for a long time grants him/her the “group status” of aristocracy.²¹ This class value is important to *The Cairo House*, because the place where the author and the heroine grow up, the Cairo House, plays a crucial role in formulating their aristocratic reading of history and writing of the body. The Cairo House as an aristocratic and political locale shapes their perception of space, femininity, masculinity, and sexuality. The families of Serageldin as well as of Gihan’s construct a haven which excludes lower-class people and provides protection for upper-class ones. For instance, they distinguish themselves from Islamists, new elites, and former colonists by claiming to be traditional and conservative (no piety is

involved). There is emphasis on the history of the money in the heroine's family (the elite), who are compared to the nouveau riches. The novel portrays the new elite as typical bourgeois people; they do not have taste, though they have recently acquired power and money. The Muslim female body plays a key role here. Let me explain.

The novel delineates the dynamism of class value at the time of the 1952 revolution. In Nasser's era, the *fellaheen*, started to have more access to what used to be an isolated and protected space. Dramatic, political, and economic differentials define the 1950s Egyptian class system. The author's family as well as the heroine's is an example. In the novel, the sudden loss of political and economic power leads the male characters to feel emasculated. The decreasing national exercise of male power causes an increased domestic manifestation of that power on the female body.

By paying attention to *The Cairo House*'s classist representation of Egypt, I build upon Steven Salaita's observations that the historical account the novel presents is given through a single social class stratum and upon his "warning" that readers of the novel should always be wary of this fact (*Modern Arab American Fiction*). Salaita also captures the text's aloofness to lower class people. Similarly, Mona Mikhail and Heba Sharobeem insist that the heroine of *The Cairo House*, Gihan, is a product of her social class. *The Cairo House*'s class identity discussed by these scholars is a starting point for my discussion of the novel's feminism. My contribution lies in analyzing how the Egyptian social class's view of history shapes the Muslim female body.

Not surprisingly, *The Cairo House*'s reading of history and writing of the body manifest incomplete consciousness of body discourses produced by lower classes. The novel, for instance, is silent on the increasingly important veil to the post-revolution

emerging strata (neo-elites, nationalists, open-economists, and Islamists). In her “The Islamic Salon,” Serageldin analyzes the materials she collected through her 1999-2000 interviews with what she qualifies as “traditional elites,” as opposed to the bourgeois elites who appeared after the revolution. Serageldin narrates the historical development of the relationship between the headscarf, social classes, and Islamism in Egypt. It is important to remember that she references upper-class Egyptian feminism from the perspective of the beginning of Egyptian feminism after World War I, and she explains that her position as a writer now is as an insider and an outsider simultaneously (156). She adds: “Historically, elite women were at the forefront of social, cultural, and political movements in Egyptian society” (155). She observes many reasons for wearing the headscarf, which are not related to religion. For instance, before the revolution, upper-class women used to wear veils on special occasions; she mentions the courthouse, to distinguish themselves from the “Others,” women of lower social status. After the revolution, some upper-class women wore it to distinguish themselves from the nouveau riches. At the same time, these women insist on separating themselves from both Islamists and Western fashion. In this case, the text represents a residual pre-revolution world, where the author’s as well as the heroine’s family have had power and capital. To its credit, though, the text acknowledges pre-revolution corruption. Also, it briefly touches upon how lower- class people celebrate Nasser’s regime.

Body-Related Issues: Marriage, Family, Femininity, Space, Sexuality, and the Veil

The Cairo House depicts how post-1950 Egyptian aristocrats relate to the institution of marriage. The way in which Gihan's family produces class culture denies Gihan's feminist agency. It confines her access to males; it imposes modesty on her; and in an attempt to exclude lower social classes, it limits her opportunities to marry in a non-arranged style. Expressing this classist protection, Gihan says:

Unlike less sheltered girls, we were never exposed to the risks of pitting our charms and wits in the matrimonial game against possibly unscrupulous men who did not play by the rules. From the initial encounter to the wedding trousseau, every detail was discreetly arranged and orchestrated so that we were spared the faintest blush or the slightest taint of unseemly strife. (209)

This means that secluding women is used to produce restrictive class marriages.

For the same reason, Gihan, not unlike other women of her class group, does not choose her proxy—a male family member who marries her off. For according to the family's celebration of class hierarchy, Gihan is pre-destined to accept her uncle, the Pasha, and head of the family's class capital, as a marriage representative. Gihan does not attend the signing-of-the-marriage contract (her uncle does this on her behalf) to save her the "awkwardness" of the possibility of being around male strangers.

Encouraging her to focus on bridal preparation as opposed to worrying about the marriage business, her father tells her:

the legal aspect of the marriage is a matter of signing civil contract. It's men's business. There's no need for you to be there. It might even be awkward for you, surrounded by all these men, not just your uncles but male relatives you've never seen and friends of the family, important people. You'll be so busy, anyway, the day before the wedding. Just leave the contract to us, and concentrate on getting ready for the wedding. (60)

Maintaining this class system is pricey for Egyptian women. Gihan's family asks for a symbolic, as opposed to a materialist dowry. When Gihan wonders about having to sacrifice materialistic goods, such as her dowry, the uncle informs her, "it's precisely because we value you so highly that we specify a purely nominal sum" (60). Likewise, the choice of the wedding ring is left to the Pasha, who convinces Gihan that her selection needs to be based on how classy the ring looks and not on its money value. Similarly, choosing the wedding clothing is a part of the larger family's decision. Social class culture in the novel is a detailed "structuring structure" of marriage.

At the same time, marriage is a "structuring structure" for multiple body-related issues, for example sexuality, divorce, and custody. Gihan's first marriage, to Youssef Zeitouni, a member of her class, is encouraged by the family's insistence on maintaining their aristocratic capital. This marriage takes place when Gihan is nineteen, and it happens in an arranged way that is made possible only through her aristocratic status. In other words, it is the material reality characteristic of her class that makes the marriage conceivable. Through the family, Youssef proposes to Gihan during a short break in Egypt from his doctoral program in England. She has to decide on this marriage proposal before he goes back to England so that he knows when to go to Egypt to complete the marriage procedures. Gihan does not resist her family's wish. There is no feminist argument here. In fact, she, too, hopes that this marriage achieves positive change. Ironically, change here signifies stasis of social class identity. She says, "I married Youssef because I was expected to" (177). In her case, the pressure is two-fold—familial and political. Family-wise, her mother and her aunt encourage her to consent. Her father explains to her that though he is not going to impose a suitor on her,

he has to approve whom she chooses to marry. Politics-wise, with the loss of the family's power and money, Gihan is not expected to meet other good suitors. In this regard, her aunt says: "Her chances of making a good match now [in the economic-open-door policy], even as a divorcee, were much better in the new political climate of the country than they had been in the days when she was a young girl under sequestration. These days everyone seems to want to be associated with the Pasha and the family again" (101).

Yet, the power of social class is not completely restrictive. For example, Gihan and her aunt are able to use a male guardian, Omar, appointed by the government to implement the confiscation of Gihan's family, in ways that benefit their access to public space. They convince Omar to be their chauffeur so as to "watch" them constantly. Ironically, what begins with restriction of mobility ends with increase of mobility. Omar facilitates Gihan's departure from Egypt before her name gets added to a forbidden travelers list, before Gihan's husband forbids her to travel with their child without his consent (125).²²

Until she gets a divorce, Gihan has to police her behavior, especially in public so as to not arouse her husband's anger or to encourage him to stop the divorce process. The narrator informs the reader that Gihan's "status was precarious until her divorce became final; she dared not allow the slightest pretext for tongues to wag. Her younger cousin was the perfect escort: whenever she did not want to be seen alone somewhere, she would ask him to come along" (111). Zohra advises Gihan to watch her acts consistently to avoid any complications. She tells Gihan that Youssef "can still refuse to divorce [her]. [She] could try through the courts, but [she has] no valid grounds. He

can drag it out for years, free to lead his own life while [she] twist[s] in the wind.

Meanwhile, if [she] make[s] one false move—‘Zohra shook her head’” (119).

Nevertheless, Gihan’s class identity (embodied in money and power) enables her to file for divorce and to insist that her husband not marry a second wife before he divorces her.

How does class construct femininity in the novel? What determines the family’s class defines Gihan’s femininity. Little is left to Gihan’s will. Gihan’s family sees femininity as a means to gain power, which they define in terms of getting and keeping a husband. That is why Gihan’s mother, aunt, and mother-in-law constantly advise her to work diligently on winning her husband’s love through femininity. For example, her mother-in-law tells her:

any reasonably attractive and intelligent woman had only herself to blame if she could not deploy her feminine wiles effectively enough to manipulate her husband into dutiful devotion. She would be even more to blame if it turned out that, with a husband entirely susceptible to her charms as a woman, she refused to resort to these same feminine wiles out of sheer, wrongheaded, hurt pride and dashed romantic expectations. (72-3)

This is an example of valuing femininity for utilitarian reasons within the concept of a finely-tuned class system.

In this context, the novel offers much discourse on making feminine clothing. The mother’s tailor and Gihan’s governess (lower-class people) produce Gihan’s (an upper-class woman) femininity. There are multiple references to Gihan’s feminine dresses, especially a dress she wears when she meets the then to-be husband for the first time. That dress is juxtaposed with another more comfortable clothing article that is going to allow her to be more active. After much hesitation, Gihan decides to wear the

pretty, and uncomfortable, dress as opposed to the functional one. That is to say she chooses to dress to impress. Sexiness outweighs ease. Yet overall, to the disappointment of the family's aspirations toward maintaining aristocratic class, Gihan is not good at the "arts" of femininity.

At key points in the novel, upper-class women's femininity is compared to the delicacy of furniture. Gihan's uncle, Makhlof Pasha, "never felt as out of place as he did in his wife Zohra's boudoir. He was not sure what grated most on his sensibilities: the uncomfortable preciousness of her Louis XVI-style bergères or the feminine froufrou of the chiffon skirt of her dressing table. It reminded him that he lived in a household of women" (36). Objects of both clothing and furniture constitute class stylizing tools. Besides the clear tone of sexist irritation on the part of Gihan's uncle towards the artificiality of clothes and furniture, there is no loud criticism of classist manufacture of femininity or furniture.

Interestingly, Gihan's struggle with femininity relates to elitist Saudi Arabian women, of whose excessive femininity and idleness Gihan is critical. These two "groups" illustrate what R.W. Connell describes as two levels of femininity based on the presence or absence of "compliance" and/or "resistance." I read Gihan's femininity as combining both "compliance" and "resistance," and I see elitist Saudi Arabian women as representative of what Connell qualifies as "emphasized femininity," femininity "defined around compliance . . . and is oriented to accommodating the interests and desires of men" (23). It is important to note that the reader learns about the Saudi women only through Gihan. This contrast constitutes another example of the text's varying perspectives on the body.

Here I am reminded of Susan Bordo's definition of femininity:

Through the pursuit of an ever-changing, homogenizing, elusive ideal of femininity—a pursuit without a terminus, requiring that women constantly attend to minute and often whimsical changes in fashion—female bodies become docile bodies—bodies whose forces and energies are habituated to external regulation, subjection, transformation, “improvement.” (14)

Serageldin brings to the surface a message that is in tune with Bordo's words—the socially hindering forces that urges women to become self-indulgent, as opposed to being more culturally active—and yet she fails to practice an assertive critical voice against this phenomenon.

The topic of masculinity is related to the subject of femininity in the novel. Serageldin discusses how aristocratic men experience emasculation at the hands of the then new Egyptian government. Gihan's father is an example. Serageldin describes how this change of gender politics goes hand in hand with the increase of aristocratic power of femininity.²³ Unlike Randa Jarrar's *A Map of Home*, where the heroine's father gets technically emasculated at the hands of colonization and projects this emasculation *on* his daughter's body through domestic violence,²⁴ in Serageldin's *The Cairo House*, the heroine's father gets literally emasculated by 1950s Egyptian nationalists, and yet he does not project his trauma on his daughter by disallowing her to celebrate her femininity. Instead, he remains silent.²⁵ Plus, he is convinced that his daughter is going to regain her class (read: her social and political power) through femininity, if she invested it in the “right” marriage. Ironically though, the father becomes more emasculated by being unable to help his daughter get divorced.

I want to point out that the novel's description of masculinity is perspectival. One of its silenced voices is a reflection of the changing definitions of masculinity and

femininity in the Nasser era from the lens of middle and lower classes. There is no description of how Nasser's nationalist projects necessitate a fluidity of the social definitions of both masculinity and femininity. During this time both sexes need to work for the progress of such nationalist enterprises. I think that the relationship between men and women in Nasserite Egypt can be understood within the framework of Michel Foucault's theory of power. Both gendered bodies are administered through various institutional apparatuses, in which the production of indefinite power is built. The novel misses this larger context.

In *The Cairo House*, dressing conservatively exemplifies using the body as a method of resistance to threatening class and power changes. Being traditional as opposed to being modern is an invented practice through which post-revolution-upper-class families perpetuate their "status group," to borrow Baraka's term. This developed lifestyle shapes multiple body issues.²⁶ The novel does not imply any piety of the family, and it is clear that modesty is another secular practice with which they keep intact their class status and boundaries. The family's valuing of traditional clothes, as opposed to Western or modern clothing, contradicts their preference for Western education and foreign languages. The point is that their modest clothing indicates class fashion and social respectability, not religious conservatism.

Neither traditional dress nor traditional marriage (as explained above) is maintained throughout the novel. Gihan outsmarts her father's insistence on traditional clothes. The narrator informs us: "She skipped down the stairs and stopped She had remembered to unroll the waistband of her skirt, which she had rolled over twice while dressing in the morning in an attempt to shorten it. Papa was very old-fashioned

about things like that and called any hemline above the knees a ‘miniskirt’” (47). To explain, “power circuit” imposed by Gihan’s family to maintain class is not completely closed.

The Discourse of Sexuality

Sex is another way in which class works in *The Cairo House*. Here, it is important to remember Bourdieu’s argument that sex and class are interrelated. Class can be acknowledged not only by economics but by the presence and the absence of males and females in public spaces: “a class or class fraction is defined not only by its position in the relations of production . . . such as occupational, income or even educational level, but also by a certain sex-ratio, a certain distribution of geographical space (which is never socially neutral)” (*Distinction* 102). At the same time, class identity defines the social character of both sexes, argues Bourdieu: “Sexual properties are as inseparable from class properties as the yellowness of a lemon is from its acidity: a class is defined in an essential respect by the place and value it gives to the two sexes and to their socially constituted dispositions” (107). Sex and class are interrelated.

In the novel, however, explicit sexual discourses constitute a taboo. When Gihan, also known as Gigi, is about to get married, her mother is resistant to engaging in any illuminating sexual discourse with her. Describing this muteness, the narrator says:

The booklet on birth control and Gaylord Hauser’s 1940s primer on conjugal relations were Mama’s total contribution to Gigi’s education in intimacy. Neither had been of much help. But when Mama had posed the question, Gigi had nodded quickly to spare them both further embarrassment: she had intuitively understood, even as a child, that Mama had certain limitations and taboos that even a sense of motherly duty could not prevail upon her to

overcome. For her mother, the world in general, but in particular the world of the senses, was a place fraught with unspoken dangers which could only be traversed safely under the protective bubble of blind innocence. Thus she would justify thrusting her daughter into marriage in complete ignorance like a lamb led to the slaughter. (64)

Equally disappointing to Gihan is that her Western reading (a privilege of social class)

does not offer her any enlightenment on the topic of sexuality. The narrator notes:

“Gigi’s education sentimentale, as it was referred to in French novels, was limited to precisely that, novels. She knew that most of her girlfriends had more specific information—though not necessarily any more practical experiences—than she had. But Gigi had always been a little apart, less curious and more sheltered” (63-4).

Dangerously, the family’s tradition of silence on sex has habitually become part of Gihan’s common sense. Women of her class do not discuss sex.

By the same token, in Gihan’s two marriages, the text does not offer any discourse on sexuality. Readers are left to guess that both marriages may be related to the absence of a healthy sex life. Yet, provocatively, sexuality is discussed outside the institution of marriage. The reader is informed that Gihan’s first husband has an active premarital sex life. Gihan learns that in England from her husband’s colleague (not a doctor), who assures her that the husband is sexually “clean,” by which he means that the husband is no longer involved in any sexual relations. This is an example of a patriarchal discourse, for the colleague grants Gihan’s husband the right to have sex, outside the institution of marriage, only because he is a man. Not understanding the reason why Gihan is upset about her husband’s pre-marital sex, the colleague says, “But he’s clean . . . I made him promise to live like a monk for at least a month before the wedding, then I ran all the tests on him. After all, I told him, it would be criminal to

risk passing on something nasty to a girl like you” (68). In this cultural context, men are allowed to have sex before marriage as long as they do not harm their wives’ bodies.

Interestingly, the novel shows how homosexuality relates to the presumably secluded space of upper-class women. But the narrative disrupts this certainty by showing readers that homosexuality can be faked. And such performativity outsmarts the closeness of the body capital the social class in the novel tries to build. The only person who can access the female space is someone who is thought to be homosexual, Fangali, the main housekeeper at the Pasha’s house. Describing Fangali’s special admission to the private space, which can be seen as a *harem* quarter, Gihan says, “Grandmother was sitting on a chaise lounge, her legs covered with a knit-shawl. Fangali tucked the shawl around the childlike feet in satin mules, and left the room” (15). Gihan has always wondered “why he, of all the menservants, was the only one allowed to come and go freely upstairs, in the family quarters. I had vaguely overheard that, as a result of an accident at birth, he was not quite a man. I wondered if he was an agha. I had heard of the eunuchs of my grandmother’s day, without understanding what the word signified” (15). Fangali turns out to be heterosexual.

I read this example as a rupture of the established class-sexuality system, for it destabilizes the normal expectations of sexuality. Yet I do not see it as an explicit confrontation or an assertive critique of homophobia in general, a phenomenon which is dominant in Arab cultures. Homophobia is an important issue which Arab American writer on class Joe Kadi discusses in her interview with Nadine Naber, “There’s a lot of homophobia within the Arab American community. . . . [T]here’s a lot of homophobia everywhere; our community is no different from the larger society” (245). Kadi rightly

insists that homophobia is not exclusive to Arab cultures—she is aware of the potential stereotypes that the discussion of this issue within Arab cultures might lead to. This fear could be one of the reasons why Serageldin’s *The Cairo House* does not elaborate on the topic. Silence is part of the aristocratic code of sexuality.

The text’s statement regarding public space and sexuality transcends any specific social class. It is a telling exception. When Gihan and her first husband Youssef meet at Jeddah airport, they “avoided touching in greeting. Public displays of affection were frowned upon here, even if the offending couple were legitimately married” (81). The officials do not allow Gihan to leave the airport till her husband comes. Similarly, in Aswan, Egypt, Gihan finds it hard to reserve a hotel room with her own son without proving how they relate to each other. Further, the novel registers that: “[e]ven in death men and women were separated. The men’s headstones were on one side of the chamber, the women’s on the other” (120). Further, internalizing this sex segregation in public space, Gihan does not want to be seen with her cousin Tamer alone. So when Tamer says, “I know lots of places we can go that are open till dawn,” she replies, “No, I’d rather not be seen out in public so late” (173). In the novel, space, in relation to the gendered body, is one of a few topics that transgress class identities.

More needs to be said here about sexuality and space. Gihan’s male cousin, Tamer, addresses Egyptian doormen’s sex surveillance role. He tells Gihan, “I ignored his curiosity. It was not impertinence on his part; it was his job to keep abreast of goings and comings. He was accountable for the other doorkeepers in the neighborhood for the good name of the household” (179). This is a socially acknowledged role of doormen in Egypt. From a contemporary Egyptian position, I observe that Egyptian doormen,

especially in middle class Cairo, assign themselves the role of policing sex; they can disallow a visitor if they sense that the visit might involve a sexual affair. Their power is related to the neighborhood in which they work, which in Egypt, as mentioned earlier, represents a synecdoche for the social class of the family. The higher the social class, the lower the surveillance of sex by doormen. Sometimes, however, they act this way to appear manly in the eyes of other doormen, as the novel testifies, and at other times they do so to protect their manhood in their wives' eyes. This is an example of Althusser's ideological and institutional apparatuses, i.e., though doormen do not seem to represent a formal institution that administers the body, the dominant ideology of the Egyptian collective unconscious, which entails prohibition of pre-marital sex, sex segregation, and male superiority, justifies or, at best, tolerates their deeds.

Valences of the Veil

Serageldin's standpoint on the issue of the veil, which in the novel signifies her single definition of feminism (elitist feminism that does not acknowledge nationalist or Islamic feminism), represents what Raymond Williams calls "residual" cultural practices, basically practices which persist from former eras. I argue that the tension between Serageldin's rejection of the veil and its recent national resurgence is a tension between Williams' residual and emergent cultural identities, for the veil at that historical point has not yet become a dominant phenomenon.

Obviously, Serageldin's reading of the veil as an article which defines the Muslim female body is determined by her social class. It is no surprise, then, that the novel does not acknowledge any socioeconomic reasons why working women across

classes have to wear the veil. For example, Gihan's aunt and her cousin Leila wear the veil as primarily political statements. Leila works at a hospital and supports her grandmother, who has raised her. She wears the veil as a means to get respect at work; in other words, she dons it to perpetuate her socio-economic situation. The reader knows that Leila puts it on only at work because she tells Gihan "It's just that I've come straight from the university hospital. You come into contact with all kinds of people doing the rounds, and they tend to take you more seriously if you're dressed like this." (157). For the same reasons, Gihan's husband, Youssef, imposes the veil on her in certain situations. She has to wear it while riding with him in the car of Prince Emir Bandar in Saudi Arabia, in order to not "contaminate" the prince's public reputation and also to avoid making him angry. In this regard, Youssef tells Gihan, "Gigi, did you bring a veil? . . . This is one of Emir Bandar's cars, and they're recognizable by their special plates. Anybody riding in them is assumed to be a member of his household. So out of courtesy for our host we have to be careful. Jeddah is a lot more relaxed than Riyadh [Riyadh], though" (81). In the novel, no one cherishes the veil—this includes Gihan, her aunt, and her cousin. There is no description of the variety of veil fashions. *The Cairo House* ignores the phenomenon of the veil as an economic tool necessary for surviving the historical and socio-economic changes in 1950s Egypt.

In her "The Veil Becomes a Movement," Fadwa El Guindy observes the increase of the veil as a phenomenon in 60s and 70s Egypt and does an excellent job of analyzing the societal details associated with that change. She identifies a key nationalist cause (in relation to two Egyptian wars with Israel) for adopting the veil,²⁷ pinpointing the key political moments at which the Egyptians are motivated to show

piety through modest dressing: she talks about the defeat of June 1967 (a six-day war between Egypt and Israel which ends with the defeat of Egypt) and the celebration of the Egyptian victory of the 6th October 1973 (which is attributed to the holy month of Ramadan during which the war took place).²⁸

I suggest that the dominant discourse on the veil in *The Cairo House* can be interpreted through the two models Sonja van Wichelen observes while studying the media representation of veiled women in “post-authoritarian Indonesia since the fall of Suhart.” Wichelen declares: “The first structure suggests a consumerist discourse of the veil that prevails in the middle and upper classes, while the second mode suggests a politicized discourse appearing in the lower middle class stratum. The consumerist discourse appeals to the images of veiled women within the cultural tastes and lifestyle of the urban upper middle class or elite” (97-8). In *The Cairo House*, there is no discourse on any association of piety with the veil. Upper-class women wear it to distinguish themselves culturally and sociologically. As well, lower-class women, who otherwise have no voice, wear it to gain an (Islamist) voice. Both groups adopt the veil for different “political” reasons.

In closing, I want to emphasize that Serageldin’s semi-autobiographical and historical novel, *The Cairo House*, is an important work to be studied in the twenty-first-century Arab American literary and cultural context. The text’s classist delineation of related issues of Muslim female body, such as marriage, femininity, sexuality, and the veil, enriches the presentation of the heterogeneous Arab American feminisms the dissertation explores. In this chapter, I have argued that *The Cairo House* silences feminist and revolutionary voices that are out of Serageldin’s class zone. The historical

determinism the novel reflects denies the reader any hope for changing the existing models of perception of the Muslim female body. The conflict between the author's allegiance to aristocracy and her passion for feminism, as manifested in *The Cairo House*, creates a cultural feminist critique that is more reflective than assertive and future-oriented.

Chapter Five

Body Discourses in Twenty-First Century Arab Women's Novels:

Unbearable Weight, the Crippled Body, and Shame Culture

While the first four chapters of this dissertation discuss Arab American novels, this fifth chapter explores three Arabic contemporary novels. By dedicating the final chapter to Arabic literature, I seek to show that the categories Arab and Arab American are loose and interwoven. I use “Arabic novels” to denote works that are written in Arabic and embedded in Arabic cultures. Thus far, I have examined the Muslim female body as presented in Arab American authors’ hybridized transnational identities. I operate from an assumption that there are commonalities among the body issues that Arab American Muslim women face and those that Arab Muslim women confront. In this postulation, I agree with Steven Salaita, among others, that there is a constant look back from Arab American writers on the Arab world.¹ Of course, the specific geographical and historical environments in which Arab American women authors write shape their literature, but that is not to say that there is silence between their literatures and literatures from the Arab world. On one level, this dissertation constitutes a gaze on discourses produced by contemporary Arab American women writers in relation to their diasporic realities as well as to the politics of the Arab world. To emphasize, by Arab women writers, I refer to authors who write primarily in Arabic whether they currently live in Arab countries or in diaspora. This chapter examines Nawal El Saadawi’s *Zeina* (2010; trans. 2011); Miral al-Tahawy’s *al-Khibā’* (1996), trans. as *The Tent* (1998); and Rajaa Abdalla Al-Sane’s *Banāt al-Riyāḍ* (2005), trans. as *Girls of Riyadh*. My choice of

these three novels is based on my desire to deal with both established and emerging authors whose writings, I argue, constitute resistance to various institutional and ideological fabrications of the Muslim female body but in different ways. These three authors have access to the US, whether they currently live in the US as in the case of Miral al-Tahawy, have had an international student experience as with Rajaa Abdalla Al-Sane, or have chosen self-imposed exile in the US for political reasons, which applies to Nawal El Saadawi. My study of contemporary Arab women writers of the female body is not exhaustive; rather, it opens up an area for a future research.

In this chapter, I highlight key differences as well as similarities in the ways in which the female body is represented in contemporary Arabic and Arab American literature by women writers. My main research questions here include what body issues does each Arab woman author focus on, and why? How does each author depict her society? What role does the US play in shaping these authors' self-perception? How does writing for Arab audiences affect the text? I have in mind the proportions of attention that each author gives to local and global powers of manufacturing the body as well as the amount of attention they pay to Islamism, Orientalism, and imperialism. What kind of knowledge does each text produce and how? What women's voices does it suppress?

The novels I explore in this chapter are critical of a number of institutions and ideologies. El Saadawi's work criticizes multiple institutions in today's Egyptian society which deform female sexuality including schools, marriage, psychiatry, imperialism, Islamism, Marxism, liberalism, and literary criticism. In her attempt to liberate the female body, El Saadawi gives equal attention to the critique of

Imperialism, Islamism, and national chauvinism. Al-Sane's work criticizes dominant patriarchy in Saudi Arabian schools, family, and nation-state (symbolized in Islamic religious police). Her criticism of the misogyny of Saudi society is, however, not accompanied by a critique of Orientalism. At the same time, she offers an idealistic and romantic representation of Western men and societies. For her part, al-Tahawy assesses patriarchal family institutions within contemporary Egyptian Bedouin culture, Orientalist anthropology, and pre-Islamic superstitious traditions. The three Arabic novels examined in this chapter show no fear of airing dirty laundry in public.

El Saadawi's *Zeina* explores genital mutilation, polygamy, the issue of raising illegitimate children, sexual harassment, rape, homosexuality, pedophilia, and sexual abuse by power figures (psychiatrists, Islamists, and teachers). I argue that these institutions, practices, and ideologies collaboratively render the body an "unbearable weight," a term I borrow from Susan Bordo. In its very materiality, the female body in the novel becomes an unbearable weight. In turn, this body learns to act as a resistance weapon in order for it to write its culture and society. In addition, the "unbearable weight" in the novel represents a lack of functionality, which, in the absence of a strict implementation of laws (as in Egypt), leads to widespread tolerance for sexual harassment and domestic violence.

Al-Tahawy's *The Tent* takes up traditional marriages, infanticide of baby girls by patriarchal fathers, limited access to public spaces, sexual violence, modest clothing (to maintain social class rather than to practice religion), medieval sexual philosophy, plus ageism and classicism in relation to the body. In this novel, the Muslim female body is crippled, both literally (physically and psychologically) and metaphorically by

pre-Islamic patriarchal traditions and Orientalism. These two crippling “axes” intersect at the point where the patriarchal father “sells” his daughter to Orientalist medical treatments and sells his country for Orientalist’s rewards.

Among the body issues, with which Al-Sane’s *Girls of Riyadh* deals are the veil, sexuality, virginity, restricted access to public space, divorce, and interracial marriage as cause for dishonor. I argue that the Saudi Arabian cultural construction of female sexuality, as characterized in the novel, is best perceived as a manifestation of contemporary Arabic culture’s definition of honor and shame. Within the apparatus of honor and shame, the traditions that describe female sexuality in the novel center on Arabic notions of the “inappropriate.” Gender practices are determined as permissible or impermissible based on Arab habitus. Some of the social standards for prescribing female sexuality in Saudi Arabia (not unlike many other Arab countries) oppose Islamic statements on sexuality at large and female sexuality in particular.

Unbearable Weight in Nawal El Saadawi’s *Zeina*

Egyptian writer Nawal El Saadawi’s *Zeina* emphasizes the idea that the muscular female body is *the* good body, for it signifies liberation from institutions and ideologies, and, thus, it represents freedom. In that, it is a feminist body. El Saadawi produces the knowledge that muscular and athletic female bodies are the only bodies that resist the constructions of “femaleness” by multiple centers of power, especially secular patriarchy, Islamism, and global capitalism. I see the novel’s advocacy for the muscular body to be paralleled by a “war” on the fleshy body, which it perceives as feminine and, therefore, weak. In response, El Saadawi insists that the female body

placed in Arab and Muslim contexts has to always be and act as a resistance weapon in order for it to rewrite its culture. To meet this goal, the novel utilizes repetitions and directly didactic messages to elucidate its claim that the female body must become a masculine body. Looking at *Zeina*, I see the ways in which contemporary Egyptian institutions and ideologies relate to the Muslim female body as an unbearable weight, i.e. variously accumulated Egyptian cultural elements constitute a burden on the body, pressuring the body to tell its own truth, to prove its adherence to cultural beliefs by being covered and/ or feminine. I agree with El Saadawi's criticisms of Egypt today. Further, I put her feminist points of discussions in a broader context about the female body. However, I am critical of El Saadawi's utopian world, where strong female bodies have the option to escape the constant work of the social system, which renders their bodies docile.

Zeina contains two dichotomous models of the muscular woman's body characterized by the heroine Zeina—the illegitimate daughter of Bodour (her mother) — and to a lesser extent, by Badreya (the female protagonist of the subplot). This model represents the strength of individual women's will power. The second model is the fat body represented by Bodour, an established literary criticism professor and her (legitimate) daughter Mageeda. It reflects a proof of conformity to social norms that are created to subjugate individuals and particularly female individuals. The novel does not offer a reconciliation of these two disparate female bodies and personality categories. It is written from an either/or perspective.

The novel can be critiqued for not considering the possibility of further female body classifications that might happen as a result of creating dialogues between the two

existing groups. It offers no dialectic or synthesis, to use Hegel's terms. I have in mind the following possibilities: a muscular body which conforms to institutions and ideologies; a fat body which is resistant; or a slim, not muscular, body (either weak or strong), which is an embodiment of feminine beauty. While I am aware of these absences, I am not going to develop further this obvious criticism, partly because I read these binaries as symptoms of contemporary Egyptian culture, in which the novel is embedded (and there is no room here to dissect this enormous cultural corpse). However, mainly because I am more interested in exploring those two existing models as I read through them key Arab cultural values and put them in conversation with contemporary Western body studies.

As mentioned earlier, I am indebted to Susan Bordo's significant argument regarding the Western female body culture, especially in her groundbreaking *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, which I employ here as an opening critical approach to engage with Nawal El Saadawi's *Zeina*. The discussion of *Zeina* is structured as follows: to start, I introduce the novel and the author. Then, I summarize Bordo's famous statement on the female body. I analyze significant themes in *Zeina*'s portrayal of masculine and feminine bodies. Here I explore how El Saadawi's presentation of the female body relates to Bordo's concept of the "unbearable weight," which, reductively, refers to the weight that society has trained women to see as excess, pressuring them to get rid of it in one way or another.

Nawal El Saadawi is the "Arab world's foremost feminist,"² a physician, psychiatrist, writer, and a persistent activist, who has suffered deeply as an Egyptian citizen, woman, and activist, especially during the eras of Sadat and Mubarak, jailed in

the former's term and self-exiled in the US in the latter's (Mayton 25). El Saadawi is a famously controversial public intellectual, and there is much debate about her works among Arab feminists.³ She has had to pay the price for defending women in Egypt. Consider this quick chronology. After publishing *al-Mar'a wa'l-jins (Women and Sex)* in 1969, "a forthright work on the repercussions for girls' and women's sexualities and bodily health of social-sexual practices and attitudes in Egypt, as seen through the lens of a doctor who refused to separate gynecological and psychological issues" (Booth 8), El Saadawi lost her position as director general of public health in the Egyptian Ministry of Health. In the 1980s, expressing her opinions led to her imprisonment based on false accusations of state crime (Lancaster 26; Mayton 25). The oppression she witnessed at the hands of Islamists in Egypt is not any less consequential. Lancaster informs us that in "the early 1990s she was forced to flee to the US after receiving death threats from religious extremists" (26). And at the beginning of the new century, Lancaster notes, El Saadawi left Egypt after her play *God Resigns at the Summit Meeting*, in which God is questioned by Jewish, Christian, and Muslim prophets before He quits. The play, Lancaster registers, led to threats to deprive El Saadawi of Egyptian nationality and to exile her. In 2008, El Saadawi won the case and returned to Cairo (26). Whether or not feminists agree with El Saadawi, her tremendous contribution to Egyptian and Arab feminism is widely acknowledged.⁴

El Saadawi explained to interviewer Joseph Mayton that she had registered her name as a presidential candidate against Mubarak in 2005 to set an example for other Egyptian women (26). More relevantly to my topic, El Saadawi's views regarding the kind of woman that can be trusted by the Egyptians to run for president is clearly and

directly shaped by the perception of women's bodies in relation to culture consumerism (read: in relation to the manufacture of female beauty). In this regard, she says, a “‘feminine’ woman who is having plastic surgery and acts like a beauty queen . . . will not convince anybody. But if she's serious, and she has character, and she has a history behind her, she has a chance” (Mayton 26). Body and politics are interrelated themes in El Sadawi's life as well as works.

In *Zeina* (2011), Nawal El Saadawi writes about women in contemporary Egypt from a religiously agnostic position. Though much has been written on El Saadawi's numerous literary works (she has been writing since the 1950s),⁵ very little has been written on *Zeina* to this point. On the reception of *Zeina*, interviewer Pat Lancaster rightly notes in 2011, the same year in which the English translation came out, that the text “is acknowledged by the literary establishment as 'another masterpiece from the leading spokeswoman on the status of women in the Arab world'” (27).

I am not bothered by any (accidental or purposeful) binarism, or by what I personally read as polemic statements, in El Saadawi's *Zeina*, as in her other works. I find that Rehnuma Sazzad's reading of Saadawi (Sazzad does not look at *Zeina*) as an “‘amateur’” in Edward Said's positive way express my own reasons for strategically accepting El Saadawi's dichotomous and sometimes reductive statements.⁶ On this topic, Sazzad reminds us, “Said's ‘amateur’ is a public intellectual who could be a writer, poet or novelist – a professional of some sort, who remains extraordinarily committed to truth and justice through diverse interests and activities” (815). Sazzad concludes that El Saadawi can be read within the lens of Said's “‘amateur,’” for “she has taken up the role as power's ‘other’ with a lifetime commitment to truth and justice.

Such upholding of Said's 'amateurism' evidently suggests that in the struggle against power, the intellectual's moral resolve has to be exemplary; otherwise s/he will become part of the power matrix – unknowingly – of course" (827). Despite the flaws that *Zeina* has, it is a significant text which captures key dilemmas that the twenty-first-century Egyptian and Arab Muslim female body encounters.

The intended audiences of the Arabic version of the novel seem to be Egyptian and Arab readers, for the novel is shaped by Egyptian and Arab cultural experiences and does not translate those experiences for other readers. Its assessment of Arab-related gender issues is much bolder and far more developed than its brief commentary on how global imperialism affects Arab gender issues. It does briefly gaze back at the West, namely the US, to offer a critique of imperialism, especially imperialist creations of capitalist consumer societies. The novel does not relate local social constructions of female beauty to global capitalism. As for style, it is narrated mostly by an omniscient narrator, and it does not come in parts, sections, or chapters. It is written in a realistic and didactic fashion. The novel begins with the transition from the Egyptian monarchy to the Egyptian republic, passing through the 1952 Egyptian revolution and Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's "open door" economy, which aimed at increasing private investments in the 1970s. This historical background is faithfully given through a working class perspective.⁷ Although it anticipates the advent of an Egyptian revolution of 2011, it is not explicitly clear when the novel ends.

Zeina conveys El Saadawi's rage at several ideologies and institutions in Egypt. For instance, it critiques Egyptian political regimes represented by Egyptian kings, Free Officers, socialists, Islamists, as well as self-described liberals. It draws analogies

between Marxist, liberal, and Islamist ideologies towards women (gender and body). It is also critical of the “transparency” of psychiatry and the superiority and entitlement of university professors and writers, especially of schools of literary criticism in comparison to literature. On top of all that, the author critiques the omnipresence and what she qualifies as the untested/ unjustified idea of the benevolence of God. Unlike all the other works dealt with in this dissertation, El Saadawi’s *Zeina* questions not only Islamism, but also Islam (as well as Judaism and Christianity). Broadly speaking, she questions monotheistic religions, inviting readers to challenge lessons they have long held about differences among God, the devil, and men. Furthermore, she questions Egyptian family laws, which remain possible in the first place because of the silence of Al-Azhar, the principal religious institutions in Egypt.

Like El Saadawi’s other works,⁸ *Zeina* cannot be described as a sophisticated literary work.⁹ As highlighted earlier, the novel is written in a straightforward narrative form, mostly with omniscient narration, offering no depth of characters. It is marred by dichotomies and categorical characters and no smart dialogue. It contains repetitive language that lacks elegance. My decision to study El Saadawi is based on my interest in literatures that in one way or another seeks to represent reality. I agree with Marilyn Booth that El Saadawi’s “language tends to be simple, direct, and dramatic, and characters are frequently etched in quick, caricature-like strokes: though the author trained as a psychiatrist, these are not deeply probing psychological studies but rather skin-deep sketches” (8). So I disagree with Amira Nowaira that “El Saadawi’s *Zeina* is a remarkable novel, focused on the complicated nuances of Arab feminism, maternity, religion, and cultural identity” (19). Although I do not see El Saadawi’s representations

of interlocking Egyptian cultural feminist issues as nuanced, I view them as direct enough to make her points clear. That is important, too, in a philosophical novel.

Zeina discusses numerous body-related issues. Its account of the fat body is a critique of our inheritance of cultural ideologies, especially the imposition on individuals to belong to something. El Saadawi sees the freedom from belonging as analogous to science and the obsession with belonging as equivalent to religion. Among the many other bodily themes dealt with in the novel are the social sexualizing of women's bodies (beauty and Islamism), the cultural definition of virginity, the socioeconomic context for rape, genital mutilation, illegitimate children, sexual harassment, homosexuality, pedophilia, and sexual abuse at the hands of symbols of power (psychiatrists, Islamists, and teachers). Class is a theme that accompanies the novel's discussion of the body. Readers of *Zeina* are left with a suspicion of all institutions and ideologies, particularly Islamism, Marxism, and liberalism. These are all dogmatic philosophies that aim to change women's bodies. The novel's moral is that conforming is bad.

The eight main characters of the novel include Mageeda, daughter of university professor and writer Zakariah al-Khartiti (Bodour's husband); Bodour Hanem; Zeina (Bodour's illegitimate daughter from her late revolutionary lover Nessim); General Ahmed al-Damhiri, Bodour's Islamist cousin; Safaa al-Dhabi, Bodour's friend; Badreya, who represents Bodour in her semi-autobiographical story; and Miss Mariam, Zeina's music teacher and mentor, and a social rebel. Throughout the novel, there are comparisons between and among the characters. The low-class characters, Zeina and Badreya, are good and have autonomous female bodies, while the elitist characters,

Bodour and Mageeda, are bad and do not “own” their bodies. The first group has muscular bodies while the latter has weak ones.

Mageeda is a fat weak woman who wants to change her reality, but does not act on it. Likewise, Bodour is dissatisfied with her conformity to various Egyptian institutions, and yet she does not change that. After her lover Nessim gets killed, she settles for a mediocre traditional marriage, where she lives with her husband Zakariah al-Khartiti, a victim of child abuse and later a sexually loose man, creating a dissatisfying sex life. Zeina is a rebel against all that is inherited, from bodily measurements to actions to beliefs and ideologies.

At the sad end of the novel, Zeina gets killed while singing on stage. Bodour leaves her husband and goes to live with Zeinat (a woman who takes care of Zeina and acts as her mother). Suggestions towards the change of family laws in Egypt, such as giving fatherless children names of their mothers, has been rejected by the Al-Azhar institution, which recommends that fatherless children may be named after any charitable person instead, thus denying gender equality within the family. So nothing changes. But Zeina continues to be a model for rebellion and not-conformity. There is hope.

Theorizing the Muscular Body

Susan Bordo analyzes how changes of Western culture get manifested on the body, particularly the female body, ranging from the early desired fat body, changing to today's toned and slim body, and passing later to the athletic muscular body. Bordo distinguishes between a contemporary “spare, ‘minimalist’ look and a solid, muscular,

athletic look” (*Unbearable Weight* 191), arguing that the “enemy” of both is “the soft, the loose; unsolid, excess flesh” (191). Not unlike other poststructuralist feminists, Bordo argues that the body has never been a raw material; it has always been culturally constructed. She observes that obsessing over one’s body is a normalizing routine, and that manipulating the body constitutes a main way to subjugate individuals.

Bordo builds upon Michel Foucault’s foundational theories on the docile body in relation to power. The gist of Foucault’s famous argument is that culture disciplines the body through various interlocking and multidimensional points of power in order to create “docile bodies.” This expression refers to bodies that have been trained to internalize the rules, and been individualized and subjected. Bordo analyzes how contemporary Western cultures create femininity. In this regard, she observes:

preoccupation with fat, diet, and slenderness are not abnormal. Indeed, such preoccupation may function as one of the most powerful normalizing mechanisms of our century, insuring the production of self-monitoring and self disciplining “docile bodies” sensitive to any departure from social norms and habituated to self-improvement and self-transformation in the service of those norms. (186)

By adopting the approach of culturally symptomatic reading, Bordo uncovers dominant cultural features in prevailing body shapes.

Bordo argues that Western societies train women to see their bodies as a reason for getting sexually attacked because of the femaleness of their bodies, a destructive ideology. She then looks at the cultural production of anorexia today. As a reaction to this ideology, some women, Bordo argues, starve their bodies and/ or over-exercise to get rid of excess fat and thus become an anorectic: “Women and girls frequently internalize this ideology, holding themselves to blame for unwanted advances and

sexual assaults. This guilt festers into unease with our femaleness, shame over our bodies, and self-loathing” (8). Anorexia, Bordo notes, “often manifests itself after an episode of sexual abuse or humiliation, can be seen as at least in part a defense against the ‘femaleness’ of the body and a punishment of its desires” (8). The anorectic operates from an assumption that her (female) body is “degraded,” and so she has to rise above it in order for her to be seen as a human being and not as representative for femaleness. Therefore, the anorectic stops eating. “The extremes to which the anorectic takes the denial of appetite (that is, to the point of starvation) suggest the dualistic nature of her construction of reality: either she transcends body totally, becoming pure ‘male’ will *or* she capitulates utterly to the degraded female body and its disgusting hungers. She sees no other possibilities, no middle ground” (8; emphasis in original). That is to say, the anorectic internalizes the sickness of her culture; the only good body is a male body or female body that resembles a male body. El Saadawi adds a variation of this argument.

Bordo criticizes the anorectic for imagining that by putting on a “male” body, she may have the power that society has endowed to men. Basically, she argues that acquired male bodies and power do not accompany one another:

To reshape one’s body into a male body is *not* to put on male power and privilege. To *feel* autonomous and free while harnessing body and soul to an excessive body-practice is to serve, not transform, a social order that limits female possibilities. And, of course, for the female to become male is only for her to locate herself on the other side of a disfiguring opposition. (179; emphasis in original)

Nevertheless, further in her text, Bordo contradicts herself, saying that the anorectic constitutes a resistance.¹⁰

The question arises: does El Saadawi's adoption of the masculine body as the only model for feminism replicate what Bordo's anorectic model enacts? In other words, does El Saadawi's elimination of the "feminine" body as a possible representation/ site for feminism resemble the anorectic's renouncement of her body? More importantly, does that model represent "service" for or "resistance" to, to use Bordo's two key words, the culture that has produced it?

Unbearable Weight as Represented in *Zeina*

The unbearable weight El Saadawi discusses in *Zeina* represents a lack of functionality and a paralysis. It leads to a tolerance for sexual harassment and domestic violence, particularly in the absence of law enforcement, the abundance of sociopolitical reasons that delay the marriage age for many Egyptian men and women, plus the long list of inherited sick "commonsensical" images of Arab women's bodies. Although I am aware that *Zeina* silences "feminine" bodies and veiled bodies, I argue strategically that it represents resistance, not service. In what follows, I analyze the theme of the unbearable weight that the novel's depiction of the female body unfolds.

In *Zeina*, the relationship between the strength of body and character is remarkably, if awkwardly, transparent. The muscular body is able to *do* actions, to move through spaces, and to make changes. It is able to resist existing realities.

Muscular and feminine bodies are contrasted with one another. Mageeda and Bodour are juxtaposed to Zeina. Mageeda tells readers that Zeina is muscular and strong, which makes Mageeda feel relatively weak. The following early depiction of Zeina as a school girl stresses her strong body and freedom. Dangerously, the author

here describes Zeina as a goddess. On the one hand, Zeina is portrayed as free; on the other hand, she is imprisoned in El Saadawi's ideological apparatus. Here is Mageeda describing child Zeina:

Her features at the age of nine had an uncanny resemblance to mine, except for the eyes. Her eyes were large, and their pupils radiated a blue light that verged on nightly blackness. I was hopelessly drawn to them. They broke through the crust of my face and thrust deep into my hidden soul like knives. She looked much older, as though she had been born a hundred years before me. In fact, she seemed almost ageless. She had no father or mother, and no home or even a bedroom. She had no honor and no virginity that she could possibly fear losing, and possessed nothing worth guarding in this life or in the hereafter. She was just a girl, like myself and the other girls at school. She was tall and thin, and her body was as sturdy as if it had been made of more than flesh and blood alone. When she walked, her figure was like a spear cutting through the air. With her bare feet, she trod on the pebbles, the stones, and the thorns without feeling any pain, without a single drop of blood. . . . She stood proudly erect in front of the blackboard. The teacher ordered her to write her name. She held the piece of white chalk between her long, pointed fingers and turned toward the blackboard. We saw her straight back, the patch sewn with black thread on her uniform, and the flat sandals she wore. On the blackboard, she scrawled her name with large childish letters: Zeina. . . . Zeina Bint Zeinat. (7-8)

I read the closing image of "fingers" here as a metonym for social rebellion, especially against school rules. Miss Mariam, the teacher, is also aware of Zeina's muscular body.

The narrator informs the reader: "Miss Mariam carried on looking for Zeina Bint Zeinat . . . The image of her walking tall among the girls and sitting on the backless piano stool, her back straight and her thin, long fingers moving with the speed of light over the keys, was engraved in her memory" (44). In quoting this description of Zeina's body at length, I seek to capture the text's direct and lengthy comment on the topic.

Similar descriptions are repeated multiple times in the novel.¹¹ The real importance of this body type is that it makes other body categories seem ordinary, which signifies their conformity. With Zeina, everything "around her seemed natural, though a little peculiar" (114). The text portrays Zeina's body as natural and strong. At the close of

this scene, her bodily movement escalates by writing her name followed by her mother's, as opposed to father's name.

Different from Zeina, Mageeda has a weak and feminine body, which hinders her from being a feminist. This body becomes a curse on her; it is a shameful body: "Ashamed of her short, stout body, Mageeda shrank in her chair. Her plump fingers could not move smoothly or quickly over the keys of the piano. Her neck, like her short plump body, sagged under the weight of her head when she walked" (50).¹² Mageeda following El Saadawi sees her excess flesh as unbearable weight.

Significantly, Bodour's weak feminine body disables her from resisting domestic violence at the hands of her patriarchal husband, Zakariah al-Khartiti. The paralyzing aspect of the feminine body is clear in her failed attempts to counter physical attacks by her husband:

She never raised her hand to slap him back. She'd look down and suppress the tears or the laughter, stifling the urge to raise her hand and bring it down on his face. She wouldn't slap him or hit him, and she wouldn't tell him what she thought of him. If he told her that he loved her, her lips might open to produce the stifled words buried deep inside her, but only a stream of voiceless hot air would come out. (47)

At this point, the reader is reminded of the strength of Zeina who resists Zakariah al-Khartiti's attempt to rape her. This comparison of bodies and actions dramatizes Bodour's weakness and helplessness.

From micro to macro: it is important to see Zeina's body in a larger context. The heroine Zeina is lumpen-proletariat at the beginning of the novel and becomes a working-class outsider artist toward its end. She does not belong to institutions or believe in ideologies. Zeina does not have a religion, family, political affiliation, or

inherited patriarchal values (for example, she is critical of patrilineal names). She is a social outlaw at the only institution she “belongs to,” school. She only goes to music classes. Miss Mariam, her rebellious music teacher, encourages her to resist school-based ideologies and to follow her passion for music. She also acts as her mentor. Significantly, El Saadawi makes it clear that it is because of, not in spite of or coincidental with, Zeina’s class that she “develops” a muscular body and thus acts in bold feminist ways. I see this fantasy of outsider artists and outsider individuals as El Saadawi’s ideology.

Different from Bordo,¹³ the resistance El Saadawi talks about is practiced on an individual level, or at most in small groups with equally rebellious figures (Miss Mariam and Zeina). This practice does not happen because of abundance of resources; it is a survival strategy that makes up for the absence of capital. Zeina seems to conform to the Western “athletic” and “muscular” figure that Bordo observes in the 1990s (191). But there is one crucial difference: this shape is not coming from diet, gym, and overabundance as Bordo suggests (192). It is made by having to live in the streets. Zeina’s thin body is rebellious not docile as Bordo’s anorectic model.

Through the character of Zeina, El Saadawi suggests that the female body does not have to be docile, trained, or habituated by social institutions, ideologies, and practices in order for it to be “useful,” to borrow Bordo’s vocabulary. The only training Zeina receives is at the hands of Miss Mariam. Her music instructor teaches her to play the piano, at which she excels, to become a pianist, composer, poet, and singer. This practice renders her an outcast and deviant in school. Also, it makes her hated by Islamists. Zeina’s fingers represent a music motif illustrating the theme of

independence. In the end, readers may deem Zeina to be a figure of resistance only if she/ he believes in El Saadawi's fantasy of independence from all ideologies, a utopian framework.

Significantly for Arabic literature, the novel manifests El Saadawi's strong views on virginity. Though Zeina has lost her virginity when she first becomes a street person, she resists all kinds of unconsented physical relationships. Discussions of virginity take place from the opening pages of the novel.¹⁴ El Saadawi suggests that having or not having a hymen must not be the determining factor for how a woman acts and/ or for how she is perceived by society.

With regard to virginity, Zeina's muscular body here is a useful body in the sense that it enables her to resist rape, both by Zakariah al-Khartiti and Bodour's Islamist cousin, Ahmed al- Damhiri. Readers are told that the latter wants to have sex with Zeina to conquer her strength, which as a patriarchal man (and) an Islamist fundamentalist, he cannot tolerate. The omniscient narrator tells us:

He wanted to hold her head in his hands and smash it, break the insolent eyes, and tame the unruly shrew in bed. He wanted her to lie beneath him so that he could penetrate her with his iron rod and gouge her eyes with his fingers. He wanted to make her moan endlessly underneath him, pleading for forgiveness like a worshipper praying to God for His mercy. (117)

Zeina is able to resist these two attacks through her muscular body. She forcefully bites Zakariah al-Khartiti's penis until it bleeds, and she stops Damhiri from penetrating her. Hymens and morals are two different things.

Understanding El Saadawi's interpretation of femininity is essential to grasping her talk about the muscular body. Let me explain. El Saadawi's critique of femininity is

similar, but not identical, to Mary Wollstonecraft's. El Saadawi reads feminine bodies as weak bodies. Both Wollstonecraft and El Saadawi criticize women's subjection to social definitions of beauty. Famously, Wollstonecraft argues:

The conduct and manners of women, in fact, evidently prove that their minds are not in a healthy state; for, like the flowers which are planted in too rich a soil, strength and usefulness are sacrificed to beauty; and the flaunting leaves, after having pleased a fastidious eye, fade, disregarded on the stalk, long before the season when they ought to have arrived at maturity. (9)

Wollstonecraft operates here from an assumption that physical strength is inherited; women are unarguably weaker than men and so the utmost physical goal they can achieve is to not let men make them weaker than they are by enslaving them to femininity.¹⁵ For her part, El Saadawi thinks that physical strength is acquired. Her treatment of the subject is literal. Differently, Wollstonecraft offers a metaphorical perception of it.¹⁶ Also, El Saadawi's definition of female virtue does not come from a public sense of honor, as is the case with Wollstonecraft. It originates from the internal will and strength of women.

My commitment to do a symptomatic reading of *Zeina* necessitates that I register what is absent from it. What the novel does not talk about, but I would like to shed light on, is a strategic utilization of the veil, that is adopting the veil, instead of developing a muscular body, as a means for protection. I observe that donning the veil constitutes a significant resistance weapon used to fight the phenomenon of women's unbearable weight in contemporary Egypt. In the novel, Zeina perceives both wearing a veil and putting on makeup in the same hostile way. The two "masks," so to speak, get in the way of the masculinity of a female body.

In the end, readers of Nawal El Saadawy's *Zeina* are left with a suspicion of all institutions and ideologies. The narrative suggests that normative beliefs are different sides of the same oppressive patriarchal coin, which aim to control women's bodies. Unlike the four Arab American novels discussed in this dissertation, El Saadawi's *Zeina* questions not only Islamism but also Islam. *Zeina*'s critique of the West comes from her assessment of global economy and imperialism, as opposed to racism and Islamophobia in relation to Arab diaspora. But that is the topic for a future project.

The Body Made Crippled by Pre-Islamic Patriarchy and Orientalism in Miral al-Tahawy's *The Tent*

Egyptian writer Miral al-Tahawy's *The Tent* (1998) shows how the Muslim female body becomes crippled, both literally and metaphorically by traditional and Orientalist patriarchy. To this end, I analyze how the female protagonist in *The Tent*, Fatima (nicknamed by her father and her "slave," Sardoub, as Fatim and Fatoum), a five-year-old Egyptian Bedouin female, is crippled by family and society in two interrelated ways. On one level, Fatima's physical disability results from her attempt to resist patriarchy. On two occasions in the narrative, she climbs trees and breaks her leg while trying to flee from the tightly fenced house in which her family lives. Consequently, her leg eventually gets amputated. This is a literal disability (impairment). On another level, Fatima's physical disability (construct of society) becomes crippling, to her as well as to the people around her, not due to the physical condition itself, but because of patriarchy/Orientalism, themes which in the novel are portrayed as two sides of the same coin. This constitutes a metaphorical disability.

In a parallel fashion, Fatima's mother, Samawaat, is perceived by both her patriarchal husband and mother-in-law as a disabled person because she does not give birth to living sons. Seeing her as disabled cripples her; she isolates herself from family and society, communicating with them only through sobbing but otherwise remains silent. This is an example of metaphorical disability.

Let me begin by introducing the novel and the author. Then I theorize the relatedness in the novel between patriarchy and Orientalism. After that, through adopting a Disabilities Studies approach, I analyze how pre-Islamic patriarchy and Orientalism transform both the mother and the daughter into crippled beings.

Egyptian novelist and short story writer Miral al-Tahawy was raised in a traditional Bedouin village in Sharqia Governorate in eastern Nile delta, Egypt. She currently teaches Arabic literature and Middle East and Islamic Studies at the School of International Letters and Cultures, Arizona State University.¹⁷ The Arabic version of her novel *Brooklyn Heights* (2012) was shortlisted for the 2011 International Prize for Arabic Fiction. The novel won the 2010 Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature. She is the author of *Blue Aubergine* (2002) and *Gazelle Tracks: A Modern Arabic Novel from Egypt* (2008). Al-Tahawy writes mainly in Arabic. Her father "insisted that his two daughters pursue higher education, an uncommon practice in a Bedouin culture where women were kept secluded. al-Tahawy went on to complete a doctorate in Arabic language and literature at Cairo University, writing her thesis on the *harem* in the Arabic novel" (Diaman1). She is considered the first novelist to discuss Egyptian Bedouin life in sophisticated ways which go beyond cultural stereotypes to illustrate the position of contemporary Egyptian Bedouin women.¹⁸ I use the word "Bedouin" to

signify nomadic Arabs from the deserts. Surprisingly, al-Tahawy's public attraction (including her winning of many awards and her works getting translated into dozens of languages) has not prompted parallel scholarly attention. To my knowledge, apart from short non-academic reviews, very little has been written on *The Tent*.

Written in the magic realism tradition, *The Tent* is narrated in modern standard Arabic, as opposed to an Egyptian dialect. This language addresses Arab readers at large, including Bedouin readers across Arab countries. *The Tent* is a novel about the position of contemporary Egyptian women. It skillfully weaves an intricate tapestry of three worlds: the world of human beings, the world of animals, and the world of genies. Through her female protagonist, Fatima, al-Tahawy dissolves "normal" hierarchies among these worlds. Fatima's conscious words and action as well as her unconscious expressions of philosophical statements on the universe invite readers to enter the three interrelated worlds and to suspend their pre-conceived notions of what is real and what is not. At the end of the novel, the reader's sense of what Fatima does and what her gazelle and her genie sister, Zahwa, a character from Bedouin folk stories do, becomes blurred. While Fatima's connection to the world of humans (particularly those of her own upper class) weakened as the novel progresses, her relations to other creatures get stronger.

On the crowded level of human beings, Fatima's family consists of her Bedouin lord father, whose name the reader does not know and who is absent from the narrative most of the time, other characters talk about him all the time, using the pronoun "he" which makes him present in the narrative constantly. Fatima's mother is an isolated figure, whose name is given only at the end of the novel by implication. Fatima has

three sisters, Safiya, Fouz, and Rihana, who do not play a significant role in the novel, though they symbolize important themes such as traditional marriage at an early age and the subject of weaving, both clothes and stories, two elements of folkloric Arabic culture. There are three “slaves,” as the narrative calls them, Sardoub, Sasa, and Sasa’s mother. Sardoub is the real mother figure to Fatima; who calls her “mama Sardoub.” Sigeema, Musallam, and Zahwa are characters in Bedouin folk stories.¹⁹ Fatima accesses these folkloric characters through the stories of Sardoub (a “slave,”) the narrative refers to it).

The novel relates the freedom and autonomy of Egyptian Bedouin women to their class identity, with the gypsy being on top of the freedom scale along with the upper-class ones, to which Fatima and her family belongs, on the bottom. The higher the class, the less freedom of space and the less mobility the women have. The novel describes gypsies and slaves as women who have unlimited freedom and yet are looked down upon by classy women, especially by elderly Hakima, Fatima’s paternal grandmother, of the upper class, who maintains strong boundaries between gypsies and young women in her family by making comments on how immoral those gypsy women are and by censoring the wedding songs that they sing.²⁰

Fatima’s hair is a motif that strengthens the novel’s portrayal of the dilemma of the Egyptian Bedouin female body. The characters talk about it. There are multiple references to it throughout the text. She never cuts it. At the end of the novel, it becomes an unbearable weight. She does not want her dear slave, Sardoub, to use it to make a tent, an idea, with which she has been obsessed. When Sardoub combs Fatima’s hair, it is an act of care and love, but when her sister Safeya does, it represents

discipline and punishment. Her mother (“sickened” by culture) brushed it only once and so there is no continuous expression of the mother-daughter bond through her hair.

Orientalist Anne, as I am going to explain, is attracted to Fatima’s plaits; she sees them as distinctively Oriental. Fatima’s hair constitutes a thermometer that measures the growing ailment of her culture throughout the novel. At the same time, it mirrors the health (or lack thereof) of the body. Though one can take this relation as an indication of the obvious relationship between healthy hair and a healthy body, I suggest that it be viewed on a deeper level; the hair here points to the body and the mind that have been healthy at the beginning of the novel and yet later become disabled by culture.

Pre-Islamic Traditional and Orientalist Patriarchy

In the novel, patriarchy is rooted in pre-Islamic traditional beliefs, particularly the dogma that males are better and more useful than females. This context normalizes the concept and the practice of infanticide of female babies. From her extensive studies of Egyptian Bedouin cultures (particularly the Egyptian Western Desert Bedouin), Palestinian American anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod observes, “Bedouin men and women avow a preference for sons, saying people are happier at the birth of a boy” (“The Romance of Resistance” 45-46). The category females is rendered disabled through the Bedouin patriarchal culture presented in *The Tent*. Their patriarchy, which sees men as abled bodies, normalizes those manufactured abled bodies. And it perceives sonless mothers as well as daughters with bad legs as doomed creatures that need to be eliminated from society altogether.

Patriarchy in the novel comes mainly from two female characters (besides the father figure). First is Grandmother Hakima, who scolds all the females, over whom she

has power, because of her age, class, and/ or relatedness, including her granddaughters, the peasants, the servants, and the gypsies associated with the family. Though it might seem that Fatima's father is the principal patriarchal figure in the novel, I argue that it is his mother that embodies patriarchy and she moves him as a puppet: "A house without a man is like an oasis without a well, a wasteland. Only a tent peg keeps a tent up, and a tent peg needs ground to hold it. A good woman will provide you fertile pasture, my son, where you can find solace after the desolation you've tasted" (78). Grandmother Hakima is portrayed as an evil and fearsome character. Much description of her body is given by Fatima and Sardoub, Fatima's "slave." For instance, Fatima refers to her as a woman with "crooked, skinny body" (35) and "stiff, wooden body" (36). She is seen by Fatima as a "bitch" and "stupid." What goes around comes around. Fatima stereotypes Hakima using disability terms.

The grandmother's clothing is at the center of Fatima's story. Readers learn that she wears masculine cloaks and puts on a belt around her waist where she places coins and gold. When she takes off her cloak (her masculine skin, as I read it), she becomes weak, fragile, and vulnerable. This clothing is not accompanied by "masculine" hard work, for as an aging, yet able, upper-class woman, she does not have to work with her hands. She commands women of lower statuses (from within or outside the family) to work for her. Her cane is not just an aid but an exploring item that enables her to interfere in women's private zones and spaces, especially wardrobes.

The grandmother sees her granddaughters as shameful and asks her own son to marry them off when they are under-aged to avoid having the honour of his family disfigured: "Bind them in chains of iron, and throw them into a kind man's house. . . .

Bury them, before they bury your reputation and your fine qualities. . . . Put the dusty bird to flight and then God will give you a son to succeed you, my son” (34). With the same reasoning, she tries to send the daughters back to their husbands’ houses when they come to visit their sick mother or when Safeya seeks divorce. As the grandmother acts from a desire to protect the family’s honor, she awakens her son to the patriarchal role he needs to always execute: “You wretched girl! What will the Arabs say about us now?” (78) Similarly, she hushes the slaves when they sing freely at the wedding of the daughters. She sees peasants, slaves, and gypsies as immoral. On entering her son’s bedroom, “she went and opened the door of his room. No one else would ever dare do such a thing, even when he was away. She lay down on his bed. When she took off her man’s cloak and her gold belt, she looked lighter, but she was also frailer and skinnier” (27-28). Things change at the end of the novel and Hakima is no longer the center of attention. She gets weaker, notes Fatima: “Grandmother’s long nose and her crooked stick were forgotten, as were the main gate and all her curses and warnings about bringing shame if it became known I was out in the streets” (49).

Besides its pre-Islamic traditional origin, the father’s patriarchy toward Fatima is Orientalizing. His spoiling of her takes the form of carrying her, using nicknames to call her, and wanting her to acquire the superiority of a Turkish princess. He calls her, ““father’s little gazelle”” (6). His treatment of her is the other side of the patriarchal coin. Instead of his oppression, through the indifference he exercises over his other daughters (especially by never carrying them, moving them closer to him, or talking to them), he romanticizes and idealizes Fatima, using well-known Orientalizing images.

A second source of patriarchy stems from Anne, a Western anthropologist. She is introduced through the lens of Fatima as a “plain” white woman who is foreign to their culture and language (she speaks Arabic with a heavy accent). Though white, a skin color favored by Arabs (a sign of self-Orientalization and racial inferiority), Fatima does not find Anne attractive: “She was a pale woman despite all the myths about her. I neither loved nor hated her, but I became attached to her because she was my only way out” (44). She raises the readers’ attention to the discrepancy between Anne’s beauty at first glance versus her ugliness, as Fatima says, when one looks at her well: “she definitely wasn’t beautiful. As I became closer to her I discovered that her white body was full of blotches and lumps especially on her chest which was inflamed and as red as blood” (46). Fatima, the “disabled,” can see beneath Anne’s beauty.

Anne’s interest in Fatima is not different from her attention to other Egyptian Bedouin objects, which is in accordance with her profession of studying women and objects in Bedouin culture. She sees both animals and humans as artifacts. She wants to “process some pure Arabian breeding stock” (45). To his credit, at this point the father tells Anne that the horse is not for sale and that it belongs to Fatima, but ironically he does not do the same thing to the national possessions, as the text briefly suggests.

When Anne first meets Fatima, she does not acknowledge her presence as a human being. First, she notices her disability, the then slightly bad leg. Fatima describes that moment of introduction: “She smiled and then noticed my leg and the bandages. At last she became aware of my existence in spite of the fact that she had been into all the rooms and carefully pursued everything with those sharp blue eyes” (44). Moreover, she acknowledges Fatima’s existence when she decides to borrow her horse, Khayra, and in

passing she decides to “cure” and “civilize” Fatima (this is typical of colonial and Orientalist thinking). It is then when she tells Fatima’s father that she would like to take Fatima and the horse away so as to take care of Fatima’s health. ““No, no, ya-Sheikh al-Arab, she needs treatment. Her hair is inflamed . . . inflamed” (45). As a sneaky colonialist, she uses Fatima’s father’s Orientalizing desire: ““I’ll educate her. She’ll become a princess”” (92), and then complains to him that her Bedouin object is “untamable”” (94), which makes the father happy; it is a good quality for his own object, the princess.

Describing the mechanical way in which Anne treats Fatima at her house, Fatima says: “She seemed surprised, as if she had discovered the existence of something special in me. It was the same way she had reacted to Khayra’s mane. She rubbed me dry in the towel and then, leaving me naked, she began to apply the moist ointment that always made my wound turn into a mass of burning flame” (49). Although Anne’s house is located near Fatima’s family’s, on Egyptian Bedouin lands, it manifests Western fauna and flora. It was Fatima’s hair, the novel’s main motif that attracts Anne the most: “it was my plaits that fascinated her,” explains Fatima (49). Anne objectifies Fatima. She dresses her in a traditional way and lets her Western friends watch her. In a neocolonial moment in the narrative, al-Tahawy lets her female protagonist tell the Orientalist enemy, “I am not a frog in a crystal jar for you to gaze upon” (107).

In the course of the novel, the “civilized” Anne teaches “the backward” Fatima three languages and is proud at the product of her education. However, when Fatima goes back home she feels estranged and unable to belong to her family. By the end of the novel, Fatima is unable to talk and the languages she has learned are of no use. Yet,

it is not purely the Orientalist's fault; it is also the fault of the native informant, the father, who, I infer, sells national products as well as Fatima, the native who wants to escape for a better life. Of Anne, Fatima concludes: "She was my only way out, but her house was lonely and oppressive" (47).

Disability and Patriarchy

What do I mean by disability? My use of the term disability is in line with Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's authoritative explanation: "disability is a broad term within which cluster ideological categories as varied as sick, deformed, abnormal, crazy, ugly, old, feeble-minded, maimed, afflicted, mad, or debilitated—all of which disadvantage people by devaluing bodies that do not conform to cultural standards" (260). This description has at its acknowledged basis the theory of ideology. The perception and valuation of physical diseases are cultural constructs; that is to say, society sees "people of disadvantage" as diseased people who are not normal and who, *thus*, have to be cured. Garland-Thomson describes this as the "ideology of cure," which "focuses on changing bodies imagined as abnormal and dysfunctional" without studying the larger context that creates these diseases, for example "environmental and economic barriers." The problem here, argues Garland-Thomson, lies not in the necessity for and encouragement of curing disabled bodies, but rather in not "curing," so to speak, society's intolerance for difference.²¹

Likewise, ableism is a socially constructed identity that sees the "able" person, who is devoid of disabilities, as superior. On this topic, Simi Linton, an authority, explains: "*Ableism* has recently landed in the [The] *Reader's Digest Oxford Wordfinder*

(Tulloch 1993), where it is defined as ‘discrimination in favor of the able-bodied.’” Linton develops this definition by discussing ableism in relation to racism and sexism. Similar to one’s race and sex, society treats the individual’s physical condition as a tool for defining their superiority or inferiority (161).

In *The Tent*, Fatima, the female protagonist’s leg gets amputated. The problem is not that Anne wants to cure her but that the “cure” necessitates isolating her, an individual, from family and community. Fatima’s disability (her bad leg and then her amputated leg) is treated as an individual disease, and not as a cultural symptom of larger and more dangerous ailments, surrounding patriarchy and Orientalism. No one considers the reasons why Fatima climbs trees in the first place.

The patriarchal father and grandmother and Anne’s acts of superficial care, which is actually negligence, confirm Ruth Hubbard’s theory: “People shun persons who have disabilities and isolate them so they will not have to see them. They fear them as though the disability were contagious” (93). On the same topic of isolating the disabled person, paying attention to the medical situation but not the social construct, Tobin Siebers reports that Disability Studies has taken an approach beyond the medical condition, which he argues, “situates disability exclusively in individual bodies and strives to cure them by particular treatment, isolating the patient as diseased or defective. Social constructionism makes it possible to see disability as the effect of an environment hostile to some bodies and not to others, requiring advances in social justice rather than medicine” (173).²²

In light of these accounts, I hold that Fatima’s disability is both a creation and a test of her sick and disabled culture. It is a creation, because she breaks her leg while

trying to escape the patriarchal closure of her female space. She and her sisters are put in a gated house. Fatima is a symbol of freedom and mobility in the novel—she is associated with animals, including donkeys, horses, deer, monkeys, and gazelles, which are all known for speed and tact. In an attempt to escape patriarchy, Fatima tries to jump on the trees and to free herself from an otherwise fenced house. “I climbed the trees whenever my father was away or had gone out to hunt” (15). She falls down and hurts her leg. The reader is prepared by foreshadowing talks, such as Sardoub calling Fatima, the ““little ape”” (1) and Safiya fears that she will ““break [her] neck”” (15).

The continuous blaming discourse by her grandmother, and the ongoing imprisonment at the house by the father, creates Fatima’s need to escape. At the start of the novel, she complains, “I thought of running away again. There were three huge, open summer windows which reached almost to the ceiling like huge doors, but there were intertwining iron bars on them. Nothing would come in except the mosquitoes, which buzzed voraciously. Nothing could get out except anxious breath” (2). Her mishaps not only make her physically disabled but also objectified; she becomes an object of more ridicule and reproach on her grandmother’s part. The grandmother is deaf to the reasons why Fatima keeps trying to climb the trees: ““She’s a damned nuisance, climbing up the walls till she cripples herself . . . only one leg. By God, I’d break your other leg if it would teach you some shame, damn you.””(32). It is society’s perception of Fatima’s disability, rather than the actual physical disability, that cripples Fatima. For example, after she falls down for the first time and has to crawl to go from one place to another and moves very slowly, dragging her bad leg, she is still hopeful and healthy till this point: “During the day I saw the main gate wide open and I crawled

over to get a better look. Now I could see everything clearly. There was a wider, larger doorway facing ours, and men were coming and going between the two worlds” (27). She continues to run away and to climb trees (76). In the process, she becomes disabled.

Things begin to take a different turn when the grandmother repetitively and annoyingly insists on associating Fatima’s disability with ghosts. I find this to parallel Hubbard’s observation that disability “has been considered divine punishment or, alternatively, the result of witches’ spells” (93). It is the grandmother’s fabrication of Fatima’s disability as signs of being haunted, evil, and filthy, I argue, that leads Fatima to internalize these negative thoughts and to feel helpless and weak. She becomes obsessed with what her grandmother might think of her, both on the level of her consciousness (when she is awake) and on the level of the unconscious (when she is asleep).

It is the second time that she falls out of the tree and her leg is amputated that the grandmother begins to call her “the cripple” (82). The same sick disabling commentary is done later by Dawwab, Fatima’s new stepmother, who informs the father: “Your daughter is mentally unhinged. She talks to herself and climbs trees like a monkey in the middle of the night. She communicates with genies. . . . Your daughter is evil” (83). These insults culminate in Fatima’s believing that she is actually possessed and that her being possessed causes her disability. It is then that Fatima stops talking to Sardoub, her favorite slave and a mother to her: “Shut up, Sardoub, and be quiet! I don’t want to hear a word from you. I can hear the girls outside making fun of Fatim . . . I’m possessed” (130).

Fatima's madness is another aspect of disability that is shaped by society. Assuming for a moment that she is partially responsible for her physical impairment, her psychological deterioration cannot be but the result of the sick culture in which she lives. The deteriorating mental status is recognized by her sister Safiya, "It's the things your eyes have seen that have unbalanced your mind, you poor thing" (75). Again, active readers are prepared for this disability, for Fatima starts to complain about her lack of sleep early on in the narrative, "sleeplessness eats fear, and sleep is full of nightmares" (24). Pathetically and helplessly she says, "I liked the idea of watching sleeping faces, for I always found it so difficult to sleep myself" (2). Also, this psychological unrest is referred to beautifully through the epigraph with which one chapter begins:

We spend all the night confused

At the scattered destinies of our thoughts.

My mind has withered from the effort,

So be kind to me. (37; emphasis in original)

Readers are dealing with an able mind that is rendered disabled by society, albeit in indirect ways. I am using the terms "able" and "disabled" here in reference to physical as well as cultural impairments. I want to make it clear that although, obviously, I do not see disabled persons as abnormal, I do not deny the fact that impairments might lead to individual sufferings. Clearly, I am wholeheartedly for the principle that societies have to help disabled bodies cope with their impairments and have to create equal living

opportunities. Yet, I do not believe in ignoring the impairments altogether and worrying only about the social construction of the public perception of disability.

To make matters worse, Fatima becomes crippled when her father decides to send her to an Orientalist anthropologist, Anne, to help fix her through surgeries. Here, I agree with leading Disability Studies scholar Lennard J. Davis that “the ‘problem’ is not the person with disabilities; the problem is the way that normalcy is constructed to create the ‘problem’ of the disabled person” (3). For instance, it seems to me that Fatima’s father’s desire to have his daughter’s leg treated, so that her body continues to enable her to become the ideal Turkish princess *he* dreams of, reflects an aspiration that the daughter resembles an ideal image more so than a genuine wish to fix a medical issue. I find this an example of Davis’s critique of the ideal image: “The notion of an ideal . . . the human body as visualized in art or imagination must be composed from the ideal parts of living models” (4).²³

Anne’s “cure” of Fatima constitutes one step among many “civilizing” steps that she, as an anthropologist, performs.²⁴ Ironically, the three languages Fatima has learned (my assumption is that knowing a language increases one’s ability to articulate his/her thoughts) lead to complete silence at the end of the novel. Fatima becomes incommunicable because she no longer wants to talk to anyone. Also, fixing her (coincidentally) causes the loss of her leg (mobility). It is only *then* that she feels crippled and isolates herself. She starts to believe that she is of no use. Anne’s desire to make Fatima able is part of a larger Orientalist power play. She mercilessly tells Fatima’s father, “I’m afraid there’s no alternative. Otherwise take her home with you now, and in a couple of months I’ll come to offer my condolences” (95). After the

surgery, the amputation of her leg,²⁵ Fatima parodies the dominant politically correct description of her impairment by saying: “Now I really was ‘the cripple’” (96).

In the same way, the pre-Islamic traditions the family has inherited cripple the mother, who is seen as a not worthy human being, woman, or mother either by the patriarchal mother-in-law or the husband. Both figures are morally sick and their sickening patriarchy makes the mother psychologically sick. In an attempt to get rid of more baby girls,²⁶ the narrative suggests that that Hakima kills her daughter-in-law’s baby girls. There are many textual examples of how Hakima describes the sonless mother Samawaat: she tells her son ““By God, it’s a sin to waste the stuff on her! She’s given birth to nothing but bad luck”” (9). The husband tries to kill his wife several times in the narrative and he eventually does, as the end of the novel suggests. Samawaat locks herself in her room and does not communicate with anyone. Fatima says, “Mother moved into the single room, which stood all alone on the other side of the thorn bushes. It became her refuge” (62). Hakima adds: “That woman’s brought nothing but disaster since the day she came. Every time God gives her a boy, he gets taken away. And she’s deranged. I fear for my soul when I see her having those fits. It’s an evil omen.”” (63). Fatima worries about her mother’s “apprehensive eyes,” and her “pale, emaciated figure, the thin veins on her eyelids, and her nose swollen from floods of tears, choked my heart with sadness” (3). Safieya’s husband is surprised at how Hakima treats Samawaat as an outcast. He complains that she is his ““cousin and yours too. She shouldn’t be treated like an *outlaw*”” (66; emphasis added). The mother and the daughter’s psychological disabilities are not unrelated to their cultural context, quite the opposite.

Absent from Miral al-Tahawy's *The Tent* is a persistent sense of resistance or revolt on the part of Egyptian Bedouin women. This absence, I maintain, should not be viewed as representative of all Egyptian Bedouin women. Leila Abu-Lughod, scholar of Egyptian Bedouin culture, discusses in detail multiple examples of "defiance," which express the solidarity of women in their "sexually segregated women's world" ("The Romance of Resistance 43"). A Power-challenging discourse between male and female characters constitute another significant absence in the novel.

In exploring Miral al-Tahawy's *The Tent* (1998), I have discussed new dimensions of the cultural manufacture of the Muslim female body: literal and symbolic crippling of the body. My goal here is to expand the approaches used to discuss the Muslim female body. In the novel, readers experience two examples of disabling and crippling the body. In one dimension, the two power structures of Egyptian Bedouin pre-Islamic patriarchy and Orientalism lead the body to become physically impaired and psychologically ill. These power symbols view their outcome, the disabled body, as a crippled body that needs to be isolated from society. This tactic results in making Fatima a disabled being, who feels disoriented in her own culture, and who feels her own hair, the novel's motif symbolizing cultural belonging, as an unbearable weight. In another dimension, patriarchy views a woman's body that is unable to produce living baby boys as a disabled body. This perception leads that woman to isolate herself from family and society and to have emotional fits. In the same manner, the woman's reaction is perceived by society as a status that is in and of itself crippling and thus it needs to be first displaced and then annihilated. *The Tent* portrays a culture which "writes" the body and at the same time it delineates the failure of the body to "write

back” to that culture. In this sense, the novel exemplifies the cultural concept of the body as a site for struggle. The discussion of pre-Islamic patriarchy is not found in the Arab American texts discussed in this project. Only *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* has gone further to show that gender injustices, by Orientalism and Islamism, may lead to death.²⁷

Rajaa Abdalla Al-Sane’ s *Girls of Riyadh*: Shame Culture

At this point, I offer a symptomatic reading of Muslim female sexuality as represented in Saudi Arabian novelist Rajaa Abdalla Al-Sane’ s debut novel, *Girls of Riyadh* (2007).²⁸ Saudi Arabian cultural construction of female sexuality originates in Arab culture’ s definition of honor and shame. Within this apparatus, what best describes female sexuality in the novel is the accumulated traditions of the “inappropriate” in Arabic cultures. In other words, it is the Arab habitus that renders certain gender practices permissible or impermissible. This process of qualifying speeches and/ or actions as inappropriate is best explained by the simple, yet inclusive, Arabic term ‘*ayb*. The nonsensically and arbitrarily manufactured traditions of the “inappropriate” can be referred to as shame culture or ‘*ayb* culture. This transliterated two-word combination, “ ‘*ayb* culture,” is a phrase I have improvised for convenience, because, to my knowledge, there is no existing Arabic expression that sums up these forbidden practices or taboos under one cultural umbrella. Shame culture or ‘*ayb* culture affects sexuality within as well as outside the institution of marriage. Focusing on *Girls of Riyadh*, I insist that social standards for prescribing female sexuality in Saudi Arabia (not unlike many other Arab societies) contradicts with Islamic standpoint on sexuality at large and on female sexuality in particular.

Exploring textual examples of 'ayb culture in *Girls of Riyadh*, I aim to problematize the dominant statement that female sexuality is repressed by Islam as well as the naive statement that female sexuality is free in Islamist contexts. Taking the path of culturally symptomatic reading enables me to show the intersecting reasons that collaboratively render the Muslim female body a problem. I expand on one of the main questions that *Girls of Riyadh* raises: which defines sexual relationships in Saudi Arabia, Islamic sharia law or Saudi society? Distinguishing between these two institutions is important to avoid potential confusions between Islamic doctrines regarding sexuality and cultural constructions of sexuality.

I introduce the author and the novel. Next, I offer a theoretical analysis of honor and shame culture within which the “commonsensical” construction of 'ayb culture is constituted. After that I examine key sexual themes such as the cultural value of virginity for marriage; female sexuality in religious marriages and social marriages; sexuality within marriage; sexuality and marriage.

Born and raised in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia,²⁹ Al-Sane got her BA in dentistry from the University of Chicago. She first lived in the US with her brother and sister, then by herself before she completed her studies. After that, she worked as an assistant professor for two years in the US. Although Al-Sane comes from a well-off family, her novel is critical of Saudi elitism, on the levels of both class and nation. The author's diaspora and profession have shaped her personal life. Unlike the Arab American women writers discussed in this dissertation, the serious potential consequences Al-Sane faces are based on Islamism rather than Orientalism. Although it is wrong to make Al-Sane a heroine merely because she is a Saudi Arabian feminist author, having in

mind the political context in which she writes is important for assessing the content and the style of the novel.

Girls of Riyadh embodies a critique of gender injustice in contemporary Saudi Arabia. Moneera al-Ghadeer reviews the text as “a peephole into what a young woman sees in her society and captures what goes inside the hearts and minds of her girlfriends, the younger generation” (299). Written in the form of a collection of emails (in which the writer asks readers not to judge her work based on common criteria of novels), *Girls of Riyadh* can be classified as an epistolary novel.³⁰ A number of critics have read it as a chic lit narrative.³¹ Despite the author’s demurrals, I, like other scholars on *Girls of Riyadh*, approach it as a novel. The text tells the stories of four present-day aristocratic women from Riyadh: Gamrah Al-Qusmanji, Sadeem Al-Horaimli, Lamees Jeddawi, and Michelle Al-Abdulrahman, who represent caricature-like characters. Michelle is the only Arab American woman. She is born to an American mother and a Saudi Arabian father and is the most liberal of the four girls. They all have access to the West (the US and the UK), where they go to get over romantic failures, to have beauty surgeries, or to pursue education. There is no immigration or exile in the novel, but there are easy exits and re-entries to the West. Al-Sane’s female characters are constantly blind to its faults. As the online interviews make clear, Al-Sane has been accused of misrepresenting Saudi Arabian society and encouraging sexual practices not acceptable in Saudi Arabia. The Arabic version of the novel was published in Lebanon; first it was banned in Saudi Arabia and was then allowed and reprinted seven times in Arabic and translated into forty languages. Though both the novel and its translation have several linguistic

mistakes, I am going to deliberately ignore them because I am more interested in its content, the cultural codes and contexts that I can read in her text.

The institutions and ideologies *Girls of Riyadh* critiques include Islamism, plus Saudi gender politics, and nationalism. Also, it is critical of Islamist thoughts and practices such as *muṭawwi*’, Islamist religious police, and the supremacy of Saudi Arabia as an Islamic state. The novel is committed to offering a feminist critique from within Islamic traditions. To do so, Al-Sane begins her text with a quote from the *Quran* emphasizing that God will not change the predicament of people until they change what is in their souls and ends with a statement that proves her belief in the presence of god: ““Verily, Allah does not change a people’s condition until they change what is in themselves”” (qtd. in *Girls of Riyadh* 11). In the English translation, to which Al-Sane contributes, the last religious statement is omitted. This is an example of audience-based textual change and cultural adaptation. The author is clear about her primary audience. She is writing to express the position of women in today’s Saudi Arabia:

About whom

I shall write of my girlfriends,

For in each one’s tale

I see my story and self prevail,

.....

Of inmates’ lives sucked dry by jail (3; emphasis in original)

In a strategic manner, *Girls of Riyadh* directly informs readers from the beginning that they are about to read the stories of the authors’ Saudi Arabian girlfriends, but with changes of real names. As it commences, a tone of anger is set. It

refers to the lives of Saudi girls as prisons and tombs, delineating images of death in life. Women are referred to as “lizards” and men as “crocodiles.” These dichotomous models parody the gender binarism she records, and they presume that the audience members, too, are angry people, who want to revolutionize the gender fabric in Saudi Arabia. The stories are told by an omniscient narrator who informs recipients of emails. The narrator describes the work as a “scandalizing series” and explains that she writes to edify; she shares these Saudi Arabian women’s stories so that other women learn from them and change their realities. These are all features of didactic fiction. Al-Sane offers an insider’s voice, flaunting learned intertextuality, especially Arab and English poetry, at the openings of chapters.

Girls of Riyadh is devoid of any critique of the West; there is no talk about Orientalism, racism, cultural consumerism, imperialism, or global economy. Nothing is said about US imperialist approaches toward Gulf countries/ oil money and its divide-and-conquer strategy when dealing with Islamists and Muslim states. The representation of the West in the novel is supremely idealistic and romanticized. In her online interviews, Al-Sane claims that she has not experienced racism, Islamophobia, or attacks on her veil during her stay in the US. This hard-to-believe rosy world accords with the representation of the West in *Girls of Riyadh*. Also, she generalizes that the Western men are disciplined, arranging their time well and keeping themselves busy, which, she argues, is unlike Eastern men, namely Saudi men.

Codes of Honor and Shame

Clearly, all societies have codes of honor that hold individuals responsible for acting according to these rules. The persons who conform to the regulations get seen as honorable, and those who rebel against them are made to feel ashamed. On this topic, John G Peristiany articulates a universal rule of public honor: “[a]ll societies have rules of conduct, indeed the terms ‘society’ and ‘social regulations’ are coterminous. All societies sanction their rules of conduct, rewarding those who participate of [in] the nature of social sanctions” (9). Clear in those words is the fact that setting and imposing boundaries (codes of honor and shame) are found in all societies. Yet, the manner in which these codes get applied varies from one community to another. I agree with Peristiany that “the more monolithic the jury, the more trenchant the judgment . . . Honour and shame are two poles of an evaluation. They are the reflection of the social personality in the mirror of social ideals” (9). I think that the two words, “monolithic jury,” are true for the Saudi Arabian definition of honor, as manifested in the novel. It is not only Islam that defines the codes of honor and shame in Saudi Arabia; he singular definition and application of codes of honor are in the hands of *muṭawwi*‘ (Islamic Police, as introduced earlier).

How do these codes travel from the realms of the public to the individual? How does one internalize shame or ‘*ayb*’ culture and begin to behave accordingly? How do codes of honor become habitus? Looking at the context of Algerian Kabyle, Pierre Bourdieu explains that individuals see themselves within the lens of their society and thus they feel guilty to break the laws of honor, which they may not understand and may not like in the first place. Bourdieu notes, “the point of honour is the basis of the

moral code of an individual who sees himself always through the eyes of others, who has need of others for his existence, because the image he has of himself is indistinguishable from that presented to him by other people” (“The Sentiment of Honour in Kabyle” 211). This means that the boundaries between the individualistic and the social dissolve. The individual’s sense of honor, or lack thereof, becomes socially crystalized “The sentiment of honour is lived out openly before other people” (208).

For people who are familiar to each other, as in villages and Bedouin cultures, a person’s honor or shame affects not only himself but also the unit to which he belongs: “In groups whose members are well-known to each other, such as the Kabyle clan or village, the control of public opinion is exercised at every moment, and community feeling is experienced with the highest possible intensity” (Bourdieu 212). Of course, this sense of communal or shared honor typically escalates when it involves women. Bourdieu poses a simple yet significant rhetorical question concerning how conscious or unconscious honor codes become over time:

are the values of honour really the ideal norms that everyone accepts and feels bound to respect? Or are they on the contrary unconscious models of behavior that govern one’s conduct and regulate one’s attitudes without clearly rising to consciousness, and which color one’s attitudes without ever being formulated? In practice, the system of the values of honour is lived rather than clearly conceived. (231)

Bourdieu’s analysis here applies to the position of women in Saudi Arabia as portrayed in *Girls of Riyadh*. In the novel, women are always seen in relation to their families and not to themselves.³²

Critic Suad Joseph elaborates on the value of family in the lives of Arabs, explaining that the family constitutes the “core unit” for Arab identities: “For Arabs, the family lies at the core of society The centrality of family in the Arab world has profound implications of gender relations, since Arab families are generally highly patriarchal” (“Gender and Family in the Arab World” (194-5). Further, Joseph notes that honor and shame in Arab cultures have been strong reasons why Arab families have to discipline and punish their daughters. She lists examples of ways in which these acts of discipline take place in the family:

Just as honor has offered a measure of protection to family members, it has also been a means of controlling behavior, especially women’s. The notion of family honor facilitates patriarchal power by circumscribing women’s sexuality, movement in social arenas, and, to some degree, economic opportunities. It enhances the power of fathers, grandfathers, uncles, brothers, and male cousins over women. (199)

This is also the main context for *Girls of Riyadh*, as I see it. The novel eventually invites readers to pause and wonder if female sexuality in Saudi Arabia reflects Islamic ideals or Islamist common sense.

How does honor in Arab culture in particular get defined? In *Honour and Shame: Women in Modern Iraq*, one of few sources on Arab honor and shame, Sana Khayyat offers an ethnographic analysis of vagina-based honor and shame. Though parts of Khayyat’s arguments apply only to the context of Iraq, many of her points hold valid for Arab culture in general. Khayyat discusses Arab culture’s constructions of honor in relation to “the sexual conduct of women” (21). In addition to the general dictionary meaning of honor (explained by Julian A. Pitt-Rivers as “rules forming conventional standard of conduct,”) Khayyat discusses relational honor, that is, honor in

relation to kinship (qtd. in Khayyat 21). She notes correctly that honor in Arab cultures is closely related to family and sexual behavior of women.

Khayyat's classification of honor is important, for she distinguishes between "*sharaf*" and "*ird*." The former is a wider way of defining honor; it is closer to respectability and social acceptance, and so it relates to both men and women, plus it can be earned by one's hard work. The latter refers specifically to women's sexual behavior, which affects the family at large and in some contexts, both clans and tribes. She adds that "There is another term connected with honour—*aib* [*'ayb*], which may be translated as immodesty; a woman who speaks loudly or wears see-through clothes would be considered *aib*, immodest or shameful" (22). I agree with Khayyat that the concepts of honor and shame vary from one country to another and from one class to another and that they are found in Arab societies at large (23). Attached to ideas of honor and shame is a feeling of guilt, which the family places on women who are "shameful" and "dishonorable" (23).

Yet while I agree with Khayyat's claims, I am critical of her conclusion that Arab women are oppressed: "Women in Arab culture are sexually oppressed and isolated, full freedom being given only to men; there is no balance in relationships between the two sexes. . . . Women are oppressed by men; they are passive and self-sacrificing. The structure of society itself makes true love an impossibility" (92). Khayyat is wrong that Arab men have "full" sexual freedom. Both sexes are oppressed, but women are more oppressed, not different from other (non-Arab) societies. I am critical of Khayyat's binaries here.

How do Arab women practice virginity? I find Lama Abu-Odeh's observations to be useful.³³ Abu-Odeh argues that gender and virginity of Arab women are interconnected. In this context, the hymen plays a "double-dipping" role; it defines women's femaleness and virginity:

To be an Arab woman is to engage in daily practices, an important part of which is to be a virgin. A heterosexuality that is honour/shame-based such as the Arab one, demands, under the sanction of social penalty, that the performance of femaleness be "in conjunction with" "inseparable from," "part of" the performance of virginity . . . the disciplinary production of femaleness in Arab culture stylises the body that is called female as virginal. ("Crimes of Honour and the Construction of Gender in Arab Societies. (149)

Although I agree with Abu-Odeh that Arab woman engage in repetitive practices to perform their conformity to honor because they feel pressured, I want to extend this argument on the relatedness of gender and virginity by highlighting how the value of virginity translates to naming and the title of the novel.

Arab societies constantly produce and regulate virginity cultures. Arab women who have not been married (read: who have unbroken hymens) are referred to as "girls" regardless of their age or social status. The word "girl" here is equivalent to "virgin," which, as has been explained, is given superiority. This cultural code explains why the author refers to the female characters in her novel, who are in their twenties, as "girls" both in the title and in the text. This use is both a parody of the culture she is critiquing and a reflection of her own interpellation by that culture.

It is true that abstinence is one way in which Arab women perform virginity. It is the culture's way of "moving" the hymen to a social level:

The function of these prohibitive demands is not only the preservation of actual virginity but the production of the public effect of virginity. . . . [T]he physical attachment of the hymen to the body, needs to be evidenced and publicized

through an elaborate performance for the benefit of the social audience. Thus, the hymen becomes displaced from its biological vessel, the vagina, unto the body as a whole, 'hymenizing' it and producing it as a body called female. (Abu-Odeh 150)

Abu-Odeh's analysis of Arab sexuality in light of Butler's theory of performative gender is useful here. She correctly observes that unmarried women are expected to be virgins by default, and notes that it is the hymen that represents the presence or the absence of women's virginity, which is usually tested on the wedding night. If a woman does not perform vaginal bleeding on that night, after being penetrated, she is perceived as not virgin, which family and society view as immoral, based on inherited traditions. This is "a failure of the social test" (149). Based on the woman's social status, the question of the honor crime might or might not be raised. Abu-Odeh explains that the hymen here is part of (an unspoken) social contract that is dominant. "The hymen, in this context, becomes the socio-physical sign that both assures, guarantees virginity and gives the woman a stamp of respectability and virtue" (149).

The social practices surrounding virginity reflect 'ayb culture. Now I want to clarify three important points. First, defining honor according to the presence or absence of the hymen is not Islamic. Second, seeing virgin women (girls) as superior marriageable material is not Islamic; it is an act of habitus. To illustrate, Prophet Mohamed married Khadija Bint Khuwaylid, who had been married before (not a virgin), while he was a virgin (the Arabic language has no word to describe a man who has never had sex before). He did not marry for a second time when Khadija was alive. Third, I want to elucidate the point that the virginity of Arab girls who have lived in the West is generally questionable, which makes them seen as less desirably marriageable material. In *Girls of Riyadh*, Michelle represents this position. Also in recent interviews,

Al-Sane emphasizes that the main reason why she has not married is that she has lived in the US for some time.

Symptoms of Honor and Shame in the Novel

Wedding spaces in the novel represent a clear site for the performance of social virginity, as defined by public honor. Being the main space where Saudi girls meet potential mother-in laws, who act as links to future husbands, these girls know that they have to balance their femaleness with their modesty. And they do. This is an example of habitus, for the girls are expected to know what is shameful and what is honorable. On the one hand, they want to look and act attractive so that they represent themselves as marriageable types. On the other hand, they want to deliver the message that they are virgins, in both the bodily and the social meaning of the word. So they signal their bodily virginity through their movements and their looks to achieve this goal.

Belly dancing is exhibit A for manifesting bodily virginity. Such is the paradox with which Arab women are familiar. Being a sensual art by nature, it is hard to belly dance modestly. Abu-Odeh captures this cultural schizophrenia skillfully:

Determining a code of dancing that allows a performance of virginity, given the erotic “stuff” that belly-dancing is made of, is by no means an easy task. And yet, if anything, it testifies to the deep change that the performance of virginity has undergone: from the almost complete shunning of any sexual expression within the confines of the traditional text, to an ambivalent cultural acceptance of such expression in the nationalist text. (“Crimes of Honour and the Construction of Gender in Arab Societies” 171)

Performance of sexiness and virginity is done at the same time. What increases the degree of difficulty is when there are mixed-gender gatherings. (Such gatherings are not common in Saudi Arabia and are not talked about in the novel.) When it comes to belly-

dancing, males are constantly judgmental: “It is a gaze that itself is very ambivalent. It appreciates and condemns” (Abu-Odeh 171). These are nonsensical double standards, which Arab women have developed ways to outsmart and/ or ignore.

The need to change one’s clothing identity before going back to Saudi Arabia is another manifestation of the necessity to attend to the definitions of public honor in a physical manner. This practice applies to both men and women; for women, it takes the form of veils and long clothes; and for men, it takes the shape of traditional Saudi Arabian clothes. This “clown-like” behavior, as I see it, is not based on religion, and it is not founded on how the individual sees himself or herself or even how he/ she is seen by other people who are on the plane. The only people whose judgment of honor matters are the people from one’s hometown. The novel is critical of this phenomenon, and it successfully qualifies it as a symptom of schizophrenia. It is also an act of fear.

Closely related to this hypocrisy is Rashid’s, Gamrah’s husband, assessment of her clothing as dishonorable to him as a man and as a husband in the US but not in Saudi Arabia. Readers are told that Gamrah dresses modestly and she puts on a veil— “Gamrah wore a long overcoat with a *hijab*” (50; emphasis in original). By directly telling Gamrah that her style is too simple and thus it does not represent him well, as a husband, he implies that he wants her to take off the veil in the West: ““Why don’t you wear ordinary clothes like the other women here? It’s as if you are trying to embarrass me in front of my friends with the things you wear! And then you wonder why I don’t take you out with me!”” (50). When she does unveil, though, he tells her that she looks worse with her hair uncovered and thus she should put the veil on again. Clearly, the husband’s behavior is not based on Islamic thoughts; it is not a question of religion or of

modesty, for in Saudi Arabia, he accepts her modest style. Awkwardly, perhaps, it is a question of manhood, for he perceives her simple style of clothing as a way to shame him. This example shows an interesting definition of “the appropriate.” Gamrah’s style is not inappropriate in the sense of being immodest, but it is inappropriate because it is too simple.³⁴ It is important to mention that Rashid has a liaison with an Asian woman in the US and does not find this extramarital sexual relationship dishonorable. Again, his definition of his own honor is not governed by religion but by habitus. This example of the veil/ honor illustrates the female body is constrained in the novel by various social/cultural reasons in relation to the veil—none of these reasons is religious.

In Islam the only sexual taboos within the institution of marriage are anal sex and sex during menstruation. Both sexual practices are said to cause harmful effects on the bodies of both the husband and the wife. Islam encourages marital sex for pleasure, not only for procreation, and the *Quran* explicitly asks men to attend to their wives’ biological and emotional needs, and it discourages them from being selfish in sexual intercourse. For example, it discourages husbands from penetrating without foreplay and from not caring about the sexual fulfillment of their wives; they are encouraged both to not leave their wives’ “beds” immediately after they become sexually fulfilled and to engage in after-play acts. At the same time, Islam asks women to attend to their husbands’ sexual needs and to not abstain from having sex when they can (a fact which patriarchal Islamist scholars overlook; when they “can” means when wives are in a suitable physical and psychological condition and are emotionally charged.) Arguing for or against this prohibition is not my concern here. I want to make the point that postponing sex in marriage is not Islamic; it is a symptom of Saudi Arabia’s, not

different from Arab's, longstanding need to perform vaginal, bodily, and social (familial) honor.

In the novel, brides have to perform virginity on a physical and a behavioral level, not merely on a vaginal level. They are advised to not be sexually responsive at the beginning of marriage in order to avoid being seen as loose. For the same reason, they are told to remain silent while having sex and not to express their emotions. For instance, Gamrah's mother instructs her to not have sex with her husband on the first night and to perform shyness, instead. This way she gets perceived honorably by her husband and is seen as conforming to social and familial values (Gamrah's sister has waited several nights before she lets her husband have sex with her). Sexual strategies here come from the mother to the daughter (for the honor of the female individual as well as the honor of the family is defined by virginity and it has to be protected). I cite how the novel explains this strategy at length to capture necessary details. But this passage ends with a twist when the husband does a sexual act that surprises her; the narrative does not specify what it is, while showing how society scripted sexuality:

after dinner in the elegant hotel restaurant, Gamrah had made an irrevocable decision that this would be her true wedding night, something for which she had waited too long. As long as her husband was so bashful, she would have to help him out, smooth the way for him just as her mother had advised her. They went up to their room and she began to flirt with him shyly. After a few moments of innocent seductions, he took things into his own hands. She gave herself up to it despite the enormous confusion and anxiety she felt. She closed her eyes, anticipating what was about to happen. And then he surprised her with an act that was never on her list of sexual expectations. Her response, which was shocking to both of them, was to slap him hard on the face then and there! (26)

Abstaining from having sex after the social ceremony of marriage is an invention of Arab (including Saudi) cultural honor. This nonsensical invention exemplifies 'ayb culture. In Islam, a couple are considered officially married after they declare the

Islamic marriage statements in front of at least two witnesses and the religious man who marries them off. Determining when to have sex, after the religious or the social marriage ceremony, is a social creation.

The novel is critical of defining sexual boundaries based on habitus. According to Arab tradition, Sadeem and Waleed are religiously, but not publicly, married. After their religious marriage, they have had incomplete sex, which means that their sexual involvement has not included a full penetration of the hymen. Sadeem has remained a virgin (hymen-based virginity). The strategic sexual boundaries that the couple have set—they fulfill their sexual needs without committing something *'ayb*. Consider this scene. One day Sadeem decides to loosen the sexual boundaries with her husband and have a complete sexual intercourse with him. Ironically, she wants to please her “religious husband” to make up for her desire to postpone their social marriage until she finishes her studies. The result is that after having had sex with her, Waleed divorces her. She gets more confused, because in her mind she has done nothing wrong. She is right. However, Waleed, being a carrier of *'ayb* culture, concludes that Sadeem is not the type of woman he can be honored to be associated with. The readers get only Sadeem’s version of the story:

Since Sadeem had vowed to make her beloved Waleed happy that night, and since she wanted to erase his disappointment over her insistence on delaying the wedding, she allowed him to go further with her than ever before. She did not try to *stop* him—as she had gotten used to doing—when he attempted to cross the line that she had drawn, for herself and for him, in the early days after signing the contract. She was convinced that he wouldn’t be satisfied unless she offered him a little more of her “femininity.” And she was willing to do anything to please him, the love of her life, even if it meant exceeding the limits she had spent her lifetime guarding. (32 emphasis added)

Trying to rationalize why Waleed has acted this way, the narrator poses a crucial question: “Who would draw for her the fine line between what was proper behavior and what wasn’t? And, she wondered, was that line that their religion defined the same as the one in mind of a young man from conservative Najd [a city in the central part of the Arabian Peninsula that is known for its conservative interpretations of Islam?”] (34)

There is complete absence of a discourse on the part of Waleed, which suits the ubiquitous definitions of habitus in an Arab society; it emphasizes the nonsense of honor definitions.

This confused relationship between honor and sexuality within marriage is closely related to another equally mixed-up association between honor and the veil. At the beginning of Sadeem’s and Walid’s relationship, Sadeem’s has been pleased by the ways in which Walid shows interest in her through watching her behavior and encouraging her to put on a headscarf. Later, though, after he breaks up with her, because she has slept with him, she realizes for the first time that his earlier acts of watching her have never come from care but from surveillance: ““He gave himself the right to search for anything that might suggest I had a relationship with any guy before him, and I was so brainless that I actually felt proud to know that I had passed that exam! What an idiot”” (168).

Broadly speaking, the novel’s handling of the veil is sophisticated.³⁵ Al-Sane represents various attitudes towards the veil without choosing one. Michelle is clearly against it; she thinks it is backward and ugly; Lamis willingly wears it as a way to thank God for His blessings. There is no male interference in her decision to veil. She wears a

fashionable veil and gets her clothes from abroad.³⁶ Gamrah is silent on the issue of the veil. And there is Sadeem's experience.

To reiterate, the male preference to marry (and thus to have sex with) a woman with a hymen (by default, unmarried women are expected to have an unbroken hymen) over a woman without a hymen stems from shame culture/ 'ayb culture and has nothing to do with Islam. After Gamrah gets divorced from Rashid, she falls in love again but is not approached for marriage. She does not ask for explanation and knows that being divorced, not being virgin, makes her less valued for marriage than a woman who has never married before.

Also, preferring to marry (and thus to have sex with) a woman who is not multiracial and who comes from a known family reflects a Saudi Arabian definition of honor, as explained throughout the novel, rather than a religious virtue. Islam is against racism. Michelle's supposedly liberal and open-minded lover, whom she has met for the first time in England, does not marry her because his family thinks that marrying her is dishonorable, not only for him but also for his family. This impression is based on the fact that Michelle's mother is American (having lived in Saudi Arabia with her family does not make her acceptable) and her father does not have a well-known family because he has lived abroad for a long time. Therefore, Michelle is perceived as an American of a dishonorable background, which does not make her good enough to become Faisal's wife. Michelle tries to rationalize what happens by reading psychology sources, such as Sigmund Freud's theories, and yet she fails to account for Faisal's treatment. There is no logical reason. It is 'ayb culture in action.

It is important to examine what is missing in *Girls of Riyadh*, and why? In the novel, there is no discussion of the ridiculousness of vaginal virginity. The author is silent. The text seems to accept abstinence from having sex before marriage. One has to remember that the author lives in Saudi Arabia; however, this standpoint can be to some extent an act of choice. Based on how *Girls of Riyadh* is structured, employing quotes from the *Quran* at its beginning, offering prayers at the end of the Arabic version, plus having Islamic references at the openings of many chapters, it is clear that Al-Sane is uncritical of vaginal virginity. She focuses, instead, on questioning Saudi Arabian society's associating honor with virginity. Also noticeable is the fact that no interfaith marriages take place in the novel. I observe that the discourse on homosexuality is less radical than many other discourses on sexuality. These absences make *Girls of Riyadh* different from and more conservative than the four Arab American novels discussed in this dissertation. Also, it is less far radical than macho feminist Nawal El Saadawi's *Zeina*.

Conclusion

In this dissertation, I focus on four twenty-first-century novels written by Arab Americans and three novels developed by Arab women writers. The works include Syrian American Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006), Palestinian American Randa Jarrar's *A Map of Home* (2008), Jordanian American Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent* (2003), Egyptian American Samia Serageldin's *The Cairo House* (2000), Egyptian Nawal El Saadawi's *Zeina* (2010; trans. 2011), Saudi Arabian Rajaa Abdalla Al-Sane's *Banāt al-Riyāḍ* (2005); trans. *Girls of Riyadh* (2007), and Egyptian Bedouin Miral al-Tahawy's *al-Khibā'* (1996); trans. *The Tent* (1998). Although al-Tahawy's work was written and translated at the end of the twentieth century, my reading of it engaged with its reception in the twenty-first century. Focusing on this literature, my project highlights the inseparability of discourses on the body and the realities enacted by the body. My choice of these novels stems from my desire to explore both samenesses and differences in contemporary Arab American and Arab literature by women. My selection of certain works rather than others is based on the suitability of their subject matter to the topic of each chapter. Yet, obviously, subjective preferences cannot be completely eliminated. This dissertation foregrounds the individuality and heterogeneity of the particular immigration, diaspora, or access-to-the-West experiences of each of the seven authors.

Chapter One on Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* evaluates institutionalized Islamist and Orientalist discourses on the body. It studies Islamist

discourses produced by the institutions of Islamic community and family. At the same time, it explores Orientalist dialogues manufactured by schools and the media. The key body issues it discusses are issues of virginity and politics of the veil. It assesses and problematizes what it reads as Kahf's poststructuralist approach towards the veil, which celebrates simultaneously veiling, unveiling, and reveiling. Here, I am particularly interested in analyzing how Kahf's project responds to the cultural dilemmas that Arab American women writers currently face. Kahf presents an insider's view of Islamist gender prejudices.

In Chapter Two I explore how Abu-Jaber's *Crescent's* immersion in the corporeality of the body functions as a means of resistance to dominant Islamist discourses on the body. I argue that the novel dehierarchizes the relationship between spiritual and materialist constituents of the human body. In doing so, it presents a subtle and muted critique of Orientalism. Instead of analyzing the construction of the body at the hands of Islamism and Orientalism, as Kahf's work does, Abu-Jaber's detailed portrayals of how sharing love and food creates spirituality, together with her critique of the correlations of religious bodily practices and spirituality, offer an alternative model for disciplining the bodies. I conclude that Abu-Jaber's treatment of the body represents a paradigm shift in contemporary Arab American literature by women, for she is more interested in the interiority of the body than in its exteriority. In other words, Abu-Jaber is more preoccupied with how the body changes its surroundings than with how the body is shaped by society.

Having analyzed key institutional ideologies in Chapters One and Two, in Chapter Three I begin to look at the modes of resistance exercised by Arab American

women authors. In particular, I analyze the use of ethnic humor in Jarrar's *A Map of Home*. While I highlight the oppressive aspects of dominant cultural constructions, I illustrate how humor questions such impositions and negotiates female agency. I offer a trickster-figure reading of the female protagonist of the novel, showing how Arab trickster humor critiques various established body mythologies. I argue that the trickster tradition that the novel celebrates and that the heroine enacts prompts the reader to laugh at key sexual conventions common in Arab American cultures. To this end, I deal with a range of interconnected sexual themes in *A Map of Home*, especially "proper" boundaries, acceptable sexual orientations, and codes of honor.

By examining how Serageldin's semi-autobiography, *The Cairo House*, narrates accounts of nationalist and Islamist historical inscriptions of the Muslim female body, Chapter Four analyzes further mechanisms by which the Muslim female body is shaped. Exploring how *The Cairo House*'s body themes are written from an elitist and apolitical feminist standpoint, I observe that the novel advocates residual history of body capital, that is, it entertains persistent cultural feminist practices dominant before the 1952 Egyptian revolution. At the same time, it distances itself from the changing socio-economic realities of Egyptian women after the revolution. *The Cairo House* ignores the 50's Egyptian feminist movement's reflection of various social classes, nationalist politics, and Egyptian American cultural progression. Among the body themes I assess in the novel are the veil as a sociopolitical force, censored discourses on sexuality, and gender spaces as disrupted by homosexuality.

Chapter Five shows key differences as well as similarities in the ways that the Muslim female body is represented in contemporary Arab texts by three women writers.

The two main interrelated questions this chapter investigates include: what body issues does each Arab woman author focus on and why? In what ways does she discuss such issues? Reading Nawal El Saadawi's *Zeina*, I note that multiple institutions and ideologies collaboratively make the body an unbearable weight, which leads to a lack of functionality and paralysis. In the absence of strict implementations of laws (in a country like Egypt), this issue creates a tolerance for sexual harassment and domestic violence. Looking at Rajaa Abdalla Al-Sane's *Girls of Riyadh*, I claim that Saudi Arabian cultural construction of female sexuality, as characterized in the novel, can be particularly read as a manifestation of contemporary Arabic culture's definition of honor and shame. Finally, studying Miral al-Tahawy's *The Tent*, I portray how the Muslim female body becomes crippled, both literally and metaphorically, by Orientalism and pre-Islamic patriarchy.

Not surprisingly, some of the body issues discussed in *The Muslim Female Body in Twenty-First-Century Discourses by Arab and Arab American Women Writers* are pan-Arab while others are national. It is worth reiterating that the gender issues dealt with in this project do not exist in a vacuum. Thus, they need to be always seen in relation to specific sociopolitical contexts that affect both men and women. Issues of national chauvinism, Islamism, underdeveloped economy (factors which work in relation to, not in isolation from, global empire) shape both Arab men and women as these novels dramatize.

Instead of treating Arab and Arab American women's writings as two separate realms, I suggest that it is more beneficial to focus on points of similarities than differences. In order for feminist scholarships on Arab and Arab American literatures to

be able to question dominant racist, sexist, misogynistic, and Islamophobic conventions, scholars of both literatures need to create multiple bridges connecting these “two” worlds. In my view, Arab and Arab American feminists need to keep intact both sameness and differences to be able to proceed in their academic and activist fights for social justice (including gender justice) without overlooking or negating each other’s identity while seeking solidarity. To put it differently, Arab and Arab American women writers need to act as outreach committees for one another, yet each “category” needs to preserve its own autonomy. Scholars of Arab and Arab American literature, thus, should keep loose boundaries among these literary lines. Though there are overlaps of the battles Arab and Arab American feminists need to fight, they each have to deal with different institutions and ideologies constraining the Muslim female body.

Before I conclude, it is important to describe the motivation for *The Muslim Female Body in Twenty-First-Century Discourses by Arab and Arab American Women Writers*. My choice of the subject was not objective. In my social as well as romantic life, I have experienced some gender injustices, particularly body injustices. I wrote this project from the perspective of an Arab and liberal Muslim woman born and raised in Cairo, Egypt to an upper-middle class family who moved to the US several years ago to pursue a PhD in English. The fact that I have lived in the East and the West has enabled me to be both an insider and an outsider of the two cultures simultaneously.

In the end, I want to emphasize that there is room for changing perceptions of the female body. Just because the female body is a social construction does not mean that it cannot also be a resource for gender justice. The multiple sources of power that fabricate Arab and Arab American Muslim women’s bodies—for example,

Islamophobia, Arabophobia, Orientalism, Islamism, capitalism, imperialism, Zionism, classicism, and pre-Islamic superstitions do not have to be trashed in order for those bodies to be liberated. In other words, those powers need not disappear so that body justices may be regained. Instead, they can be recycled. Such discriminations are not inherent in the body itself. As my work has shown, these prejudices are the outcome of habitus, which, by definition, is political. Injustices toward the female body have to be revolted against. Resistances must not be compromising. Existing politics must be replaced by others that pay homage to the individuality of bodies and that avoid detective work, forcing the body to tell its “truth.” In order to stop oppressive dominant perceptions of Arab and Arab American Muslim female bodies, as either terrorizing bodies or sacred bodies, a body revolution has to happen. This revolution does not necessarily have to start in the streets only; it can very well be inspired by transformative literature. I was moved by the literature I explored in this dissertation and I hope that my scholarship together with other projects can lead to more social criticisms of body norms. What is done *can* be undone.

Notes

Introduction

1. Arab American literature is by no means a new field of study. However, it did not gain much attention from American audiences until 9/11. In her “From Nostalgia to Critique: An Overview of Arab American Literature,” an essay published in the 2006 journal MELUS dedicated to Arab American writing, Tanyss Ludescher traces the history of Arab American literature, observing three phases of development. The first wave of Arab immigrants, which is known as *Mahjar* (immigrants), mainly a group of Syrian Christians who moved to the USA between 1880 and 1924, assimilated to American culture and have not maintained an interest in the political issues of their homelands. Thus, themes of “national consciousness” have been mostly absent from their writings. The second wave, “a decade after World War II,” has been a group of educated people who have spoken English well and have occupied important positions in the US. This group has mainly consisted of Muslims who have resisted assimilation and have insisted on identifying themselves as Arabs. Among this group are Palestinian refugees of 1948. Not surprisingly, the writing of this wave reflects its Arab identity and national awareness. The third wave began in 1967, after the new immigration law in the US. This group “embraces” Arab American identity. It represents the most heterogeneous group, ethnicity-wise and politics-wise. In the 1990s, anthologies dedicated to Arab American writings began to be published, emphasizing the growth of this literature. The main interest of the writing of Arab Americans now is to have a “voice.”

My point of sketching this historical development is to elucidate the dynamism and heterogeneity of Arab American literature. Though the publishing market for books on Arab American literature seems to be full of multiple hardships, Arab American criticism is growing. Steven Salaita argues convincingly that “Arab American literature is undergoing something of a qualitative and quantitative maturation” (*Modern Arab American Fiction 2*). He asserts that “fiction, especially the novel, has emerged in the past decade as a formidable art form in the Arab American community” (2).

2. Although I am aware that there are separate discourses on Arab American women’s body and on Muslim American women’s body, I focus here on the points of intersection.

3. On anti-Arab racism, see, for instance, Nouri Gana’s “Introduction: Race, Islam, and the Task of Muslim and Arab American Writing.” Gana argues that Arab American racism did not start with the 9/11 attacks, but it is the result of a body of immigration laws in the US:

The immigration lawmaking trajectory . . . underlaid as it is by the geopolitics of suspicion and the all-out war on terror, produces the conditions of possibility of racing Islam . . . while politicizing Muslims and Arabs alike—conferring on them, by virtue of their religious and cultural affiliations or differentials, a capacious political significance where the stakes are high. (1577)

Further, Fadda-Conrey identifies two categories of racism, which, though intersecting, are not the same: “Islamophobic” and “Arabophobic (Arab American Citizenship in Crisis 547). See also Michael Suleiman’s *The Arabs in the Mind of America*. pp. 1-14; and 87-111. Steven Salaita uses “anti-Arab racism” instead of “Islamophobia” because many Arab Christians have suffered from the same problems by association and because, he argues, the hatred of Islam is partially constructed by political issues: “Anti-Arab racism, I think, works better here because ultimately it contextualizes misrepresentations of Islam within a wider culture of prejudice, hatred, and oppression that continually recapitulates a modernized form of the traditional American metanarrative of racism” (*Anti-Arab Racism in the USA* 11). I employ Salaita’s comprehensive definition of anti-Arab racism:

I use it generally to mean acts of physical violence against Arabs based not on chance but largely (or exclusively) on the ethnicity of the victim; moments of ethnic discrimination in schools . . . the Othering of Arabs based on essentialized or biologically determined ideology In short, the redirection of classic American racism at a non-White ethnic group whose origin lie in an area of the world marked for colonization by the United States and whose resident are therefore dehumanized for the sake of political expediency. (12-13)

4. Commenting on her foundational, *Bint Arab: Arab and Arab American Women in the United States*., Evelyn Shakir states: “Given their diverse backgrounds, it is no surprise that the speakers in the book do not all agree on matters of fundamental concern to women” (10).

5. I focus mainly on Said’s second definition of Orientalism: “Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between ‘the Orient’ and (most of the time) ‘the Occident’” (2).

6. There is no rarity of the materials which discuss colonial discourses on the veil. See, for instance, Amina Wadud’s *Inside the Gender Jihad* and her *Qur’an and Woman*. Leila Ahmed’s widely acknowledged and insightful *Women and Gender in Islam* is a good place to start. Employing a historical approach, Ahmed analyzes skillfully and in detail many reasons why patriarchy and sexism are not inherent in Islam. See particularly “The Discourse of the Veil,” 144- 168. Also, Nimat Hafez Barazangi does a good job analyzing how Islam advocates social justice in general and gender justice in particular. She emphasizes, however, the fact that interpretations of Islam are not devoid of mythologies. More relevantly to my topic, Barazangi explores how Orientalism plays a role in developing Islamist discourses, a practice which leads to fixating Islam.

7. For the same reason, I keep the categories Oriental versus Occidental or Eastern versus Western.

8. Obviously, the problem escalates after 9/11, where

some Muslims chose to become stealth to protect themselves. . . . Other Muslim women in the United States who formerly did not cover their hair as an expression of their religious faith chose to start wearing the hijab as a political act. These women chose to no longer fly under the radar undetectable as Muslim

and to visualize their identities. Wearing the hijab became an expression of solidarity with other Muslims under siege, as a mark of identity as opposed to an expression of religious piety. (“Stealth Muslim” 309)

Alsultany defines stealth as “the attribute or characteristic of acting in secrecy, or in such a way that the actions are unnoticed or difficult to detect by others” (307).

9. Joe Kadi, Therese Saliba, Carolyn Allen, and Judith A. Howard are only a few critics who have similar standpoints on this thorny subject.

10. Here, Jarmakani is developing Joe Kadi’s (formerly Joanna Kadi) argument in “Speaking about Silence.”

11. I subscribe to Miriam Cooke’s argument that Islamic feminism “is not rigid. It does not describe an identity, but rather an attitude and intention to seek justice” Cooke insists: “The key to understanding Islamic feminist discursive strategies is to take cognizance of our own. We must examine both the images and the image makers. We need to understand how images naturalize cultural, political, geographical, and religious differences” (*Women Claim Islam* 137). See also Maysam J. Al-Faruqi, who rejects any liberation that comes from outside the boundaries of Islam. Provocatively, she declares that she is “woman (or man) by accident but Muslim by choice, and any analysis that does not formulate the issue [self-identity] (let alone the solution) from the Islamic perspective is simply irrelevant to [her]” (75-76).

1. In his classic, *Orientalism*, Palestinian American Edward Said offers three definitions for what he means by Orientalism and Orientalists. The first definition refers to “Anyone who teaches, writes about, or researches the Orient . . . whether the person is an anthropologist, sociologist, historian, or philologist—either in its specific or general aspects, is an Orientalist, and what he or she does is Orientalism” (2). The second is “Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction between ‘the Orient’ and (most of the time) ‘the Occident.’” (2). And the third is:

[S]omething more historically and materially defined than either of the other two . . . Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient. (3)

2. See, for instance, Baer and Glasgow who view *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* as a representation of the lives of Muslims in America. Dangerously, they assert that the novel “is definitely a window through which outsiders can view the reality of many Muslims in the United States” (27).

3. Though Khan uses the word Islam here, the larger argument of her project is about Islamism.

4. Listing a number of audiences she has in mind, Kahf informs her interviewers Davis, et al. that she writes for “American Muslims;” “Other American outside that first audience;” “Arabic-speaking intellectuals and scholars, the secular as well as the religious, across the spectrum of all the religions in the Arab world;” “Arab Americans” (“Intercultural Education” 385); Academics and non-academics (386); and “People of

faith audiences” (386). Yet, she argues that this awareness does not affect her choices. (386)

5. For an analysis of the history of Islamic feminism, see Miriam Cooke’s *Women Claim Islam* 55-63, and Maysam J. Al-Faruqi who defines herself as a “woman (or man) by accident but Muslim by choice” (75-76).

6. My underlying assumption here is that representational qualities are not oppositional to poststructuralist literature. In this, I agree with Susan Bordo, who argues: “Despite its explicit rejection of conceptions of knowledge that view the mind as a ‘mirror of nature,’ deconstructionism reveals a longing for adequate representations—unlike Cartesian conceptions, but no less ambitious—and of a relentlessly heterogeneous reality” (229).

7. Nimat Hafez Barazangi analyzes the ways in which Islam advocates justice in general and gender justice in particular. However, she adds that interpretations of Islam are not devoid of mythologies. Moreover, she analyzes the role Orientalism plays in developing Islamist discourses, which leads to fixating Islam. She explains how some scholars follow faulty interpretations of predecessors merely because they are dominant. I view this way of acquiring knowledge typical of how Orientalists gather their knowledge of the Orient. (“Muslim Women’s Islamic Higher Learning” 3) Drawing on Mahmoud Arkoun, Barazangi argues that many Islamic practices originated in Orientalism, colonialism, and postcolonialism.

8. This specific biography makes us read Kahf’s novel as an example of immigrant literature, which is different from the literature of writers born and raised in the US. In making this assumption, I am agreeing with Muslim American scholar Samaa Abdurraqib and Arab American scholar Wail Hassan. In her “Hijab Scenes: Muslim Women, Migration, and Hijab in Immigrant Muslim Literature,” Abdurraqib reads Kahf’s work, specifically poetry, as an illustration of immigrant literature. She argues Islam is not yet part of the cultural fabric in the US. Observing dominant hostile picture of Islam in the US, Abdurraqib values Kahf’s effort to destabilize the binary oppositions between being Muslim and being American. Also, she registers Kahf’s awareness of the necessity of the change of the very structure of immigrant literature in order for it to express Muslim women’s standpoint on the veil. Khadra’s veil-and-unveil code of dress confuses this set of options. Abdurraqib correctly argues that Kahf’s text may narrow the bridge between Americans and Muslims by showing the points of intersection. Similarly, in his recent *Immigrant Narratives: Orientalism And Cultural Translation in Arab American and Arab British Literature*, Wail S. Hassan insists that scholars have to distinguish between literatures written by immigrant Arab writers and those by Arab writers born in the West of Arab origins. Neither implies an essentialist argument, immigrants are more or less “authentic.” Defining what has been qualified as “Muslim immigrant literature,” Hassan explains it is “a literature that seeks to articulate an alternative episteme derived from Islam but shaped specifically by immigrant perspectives” (182). He borrows this term from Leila Aboulela (234). Following Hassan’s path, I do not aim to categorize Kahf based on the number of years she has spent in her “home country” and the “host country.” Rather, my stress on her critical position comes from my insistence on portraying her as an individual rather than as a category. In other words, by highlighting her particular life experience, I hope to

avoid reading her as a cultural ambassador or representative. I am not arguing that Kahf does not represent anything, but I insist that what she represents is filtered through her specific experience and her work.

9. *Contemporary Authors* 214-215.

10. *Current Biography International Yearbook* (2007).

11. Similarly, in her “Faith of My Mothers,” Kahf uses a joyful mode to delineate her special position in relation to her headscarves and also prayers.

12. As Wail Hassan observes, translational literature is not “all immigrant writing, but, strictly speaking, those texts that straddle two languages, at once foregrounding, performing, and problematizing the act of translation . . .

[T]ranslational texts lay special emphasis on translation as a crucial component of cross-cultural contact” (32-33). Thus translations disrupt that authoritative role that a translator may have. There is no ““original”” text to start with.

13. In her review of the novel, Shahnaz Khan has a similar argument. She says Kahf “is unapologetic and uncelebratory” in portraying American Muslims (391). She adds, “One walks away with an insider perspective without the feeling that we have arrived at any absolute certainty about Muslim life” (391).

14. For a discussion of possible politics of the black veil, see Malek Alloula’s analysis of how early French photographers were disappointed by the black veil in Algeria. Alloula argues that the veil, especially the black veil, represents “refusal,” “rejection,” and “negation” of the white man’s “desire” toward Arab women (4-5). Kahf is critical of black veils and does not entertain the political statement that might be implied by wearing it, which is separatism from mainstream American culture. By making this phase fail to achieve Khadra’s Islamic goals or to stop anti-Arab racism, the novel de-signifies the black veil as a political symbol.

15. In a satirical tone, the novel states that Khadra and her friends have already realized their goals by wearing buttons that defend Islam. This is followed by a comment that they do not know what they want. The failure of this cause is best represented by the irony that one of her friends, who was very enthusiastic about this Islamist life, Nilofar, gets married, gets pregnant, and then becomes too busy to care about their “mission.” Yet, justifying her sacrifice of the cause, Nilofar claims that raising up Muslim kids is the true job of a Muslim mother. This scene is immediately followed by her vomiting. This is an example of how the ironic tone of the narrative saves the reader from the didactic messages that the text presents frequently.

16. Khadra realizes that the Shelbys, a secular Muslim family that immigrates to the US early on and the object of ridicule of the Dawah Center, is not less faithful to gender binaries. The Dawah Center sees Mishawaka Muslims, to which the Shelbys belong, as fake Muslims: “The Muslims who lived in that northern Indiana town were the assimilated kind, second and third-generation Americans descended from turn-of-the-century Arab immigrants. They had failed to preserve their identity—they’d caved” (184). Khadra labels Joy as “McMuslim,” which means they “believe by default in the typical American lifestyle of self-indulgence, waste, and global oppression” (186). The novel is critical of both stances, namely rejection of Islam and viewing Islam as the ultimate identity definer. Rose, Shelby’s mother, insists ““Men should be men and women should be women . . . I don’t truck with all this women’s lib business. What do

we need libbing from? . . . it goes against religion” (192). Khadra comments, “I think religion allows a little more flexibility than that auntie . . . the Prophet used to help his wife with the housework, and sitna [our lady, which here means a female Muslim scholar] Aisha led a battle once” (192).

17. Here, Wail Hassan relies on Antoine Berman’s theories.

18. For a thorough analysis of this subject, see, for instance, Amina Wadud’s *Inside the Gender Jihad* and her *Qur’an and Woman*, and Leila Ahmed’s *Women and Gender in Islam*.

19. Khadra always Others him in this regard. On many occasions, the reader is reminded that Juma is not Arab American; he is an Arab living in America, who refuses to get his citizenship through his wife and thinks of Kuwait as the only home.

20. For an analysis of sex in Islamic marriages, see, for instance, Mona Mikhail’s *Images of Arab Women*, in which she clarifies that in Islamic marriages sex is a desired end, not associated with procreation (18-19).

21. In her “Spare Me the Sermon on Muslim Women,” Kahf draws a contrast between the position of women in Islam and in Christianity. She admits that the place of women in some Muslim countries is not the same as other non-Muslim ones, but insists that the proper socioeconomic contexts need to be considered. I understand that Kahf here is doing cross-edged critique, but I worry that this approach may create separatist and antagonistic rhetoric. Kahf, for example, angrily says:

Medieval Christianity excoriated Islam for being orgiastic, which seems to mean that Muslims didn’t lay a guilt trip on hot sex. . . . Now that hot sex is all the rage in the post-sexual revolution west, you’d think Muslims would get some credit for the pro-sex attitude of Islam--but no. The older stereotype has been turned on its head, and in the new one, we are the prudes. Listen, we’re the only monotheistic faith I know with an actual legal rule that the wife has a right to orgasm. (14)

22. For how marriage is perceived in Islam, see Azizah Y. Al-Hibri’s “An Introduction to Muslim Women’s Rights.” Building her argument on the *Quran*, she sees

[M]arriage as an institution in which human beings find tranquility and affection with each other. It is for this reason that some prominent traditional Muslim scholars have argued that a woman is not required to serve her husband, prepare his food, or clean his house. . . . This assertion is based on the recognition that the Muslim wife is the companion to her husband and not a maid. Many jurists also defined the purpose of the marriage institution in terms of sexual enjoyment (as distinguished from reproduction. (57)

Al-Hibri views marriage as a contract, in which women have the right to write their own conditions, for example about the place where they will live and their desire to pursue an education. (58) Muslim women do not have to claim their money is their own, because by being Muslims, they gain this privilege by default.

23. The topic of possessing the wife is too large to be discussed here. Suffice to say that my objectives in this chapter is to clarify that this issue is not exclusive to Islamic and/ or Arabic cultures. In her *Scheherazade Goes West*, Fatema Mernissi

argues that both Eastern and Western men aim to control women, but they do so differently. While the Eastern man may control women through the veil, which she sees as a confinement of a woman's space, the Western man controls her time. He also believes that only young women belong to the discourse of beauty and so women do their best to look young. In this regard, she says: "Unlike the Muslim man, who uses space to establish male domination by excluding women from the public arena, the Western man manipulates time and light. He declares that in order to be beautiful, a woman must look fourteen years old. . . . By putting the spotlight on the female child and framing her as the ideal of beauty, he condemns the mature woman to invisibility" (213). She concludes:

These Western attitudes, I thought, are even more dangerous and cunning than the Muslim ones because the weapon used against women is time. Time is less visible, more fluid than space. The Western man uses images and spotlights to freeze female beauty within an idealized childhood, and forces women to perceive aging—that normal unfolding of the years—as a shameful devaluation. . . . The violence embodied in the Western harem is less visible than in the Eastern harem because aging is not attacked directly, but rather masked as an aesthetic choice. (214)

I see Juma as occupying *both* Khadra's space (as I explain) and time. He insists that she does the housework—which is not *Quranic*. He does not allow her to postpone pregnancy till she finishes her studies. Though the novel does not stress the fabricated value of Khadra's youth, it emphasizes the fact that Juma is attracted to her physical beauty. Kahf correctly distinguishes between Islam as theory, given in the *Quran* and the *hadith* (Mohammad's sayings), and cultural practice which vary from one country to another and from one individual to another based on their positionalities.

24. It is important to remember what Barthes teaches us here: "In order to gauge the political load of an object and the mythical hollow which espouses it, one must never look at things from the point of view of the signification, but from that of the signifier, of the thing which has been robbed; and within the signifier, from the point of view of the language-object, that is, of the meaning" (145).

25. On this point, see *Muslim Women Scholar-Activists in North America*, particularly Riffat Hassan's "Is Family Planning Permitted by Islam?" 226-240. Worried about the dominance of cultural mythologies about abortion in Islam, Hassan stresses "What needs, urgently, to be done is a critical review of the idea that the Qur'an [also spelled as *Quran*] is a complete code of life" (230). Though the *Quran* permits divorce, many Islamic cultures view it as an act of shame. Interpellated by this dominant sociological, not religious, ideology, Eyad tells Khadra, "You just keep a lid on it, Khadra, that's all I'm saying" (253).

26. For a discussion of Saudi Arabian patriarchal discourse on the Muslim female body, see the last section of chapter 5.

27. Following Marx, Foucault, and Bourdieu, Bordo argues: "Through routine, habitual activity, our bodies learn what is 'inner' and what is 'outer,' which gesture are forbidden and which required, how violable or inviolable are the boundaries of our bodies, how much space around the body maybe claimed" (16).

28. For a discussion of the definition of shame in Arab culture, see the last section of chapter 5

29. I discuss the interrelatedness of the materiality and the spirituality of the Muslim female body in chapter 3.

30. See Somaya Sami Sabry, *Arab-American Women's Writing and Performance*, particularly "American Orientalism," 38-42, and "Orientalism and Shifts in Perspective" (13-18).

31. In his *Anti-Arab Racism in the USA*, Steven Salaita chooses to use "anti-Arab racism" instead of "Islamophobia" because many Arab Christians face the same problems by association and because the hatred of Islam is partially constructed by political issues (11). I find his decision convincing. In this regard, Salaita says, "Anti-Arab racism, I think, works better here because ultimately it contextualizes misrepresentations of Islam within a wider culture of prejudice, hatred, and oppression that continually recapitulates a modernized form of the traditional American metanarrative of racism" (11). Defining anti-Arab racism, he states:

I use it generally to mean acts of physical violence against Arabs based not on chance but largely (or exclusively) on the ethnicity of the victim; moments of ethnic discrimination in schools . . . the Othering of Arabs based on essentialized or biologically determined ideology In short, the redirection of classic American racism at a non-White ethnic group whose origins lie in an area of the world marked for colonization by the United States and whose residents are therefore dehumanized for the sake of political expediency. (12-13)

Clearly, Salaita favors interethnic solidarity as a weapon against racism.

32. In her review of the novel, Shahnaz Khan comments, "This book is an excellent resource in critical anti-racist education, transnational and postcolonial feminist criticism as it destabilizes concepts of home, Islam, America, religion, and womanhood" (391).

33. There is no scarcity of material on the colonial discourse on the veil. See, for instance, Leila Ahmed's *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*, particularly "The Discourse of the Veil" 144- 168.

34. Malek Alloula is an Algerian writer known to English readers for his well-received *The Colonial Harem* (1986), in which he discusses French Orientalist photographic misrepresentations of Algerian women from the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

35. Ironically, this celebration of the idealism and the purity of religion in a Saudi Arabian context turns out to be false.

36. See Introduction.

37. See Introduction.

38. Kahf clarifies that after Khadra wears the hijab, "she'd still be able to swim in private pools" (23).

39. See also Amira Jarmakani's *Imagining Arab Womanhood*. Acknowledging multiple reasons for wearing the veil and critiquing the West for overlooking them, Jarmakani states:

[T]he interpretation of the veil as an absolute boundary for women . . . ignores its functions in many Muslim societies as a garment that enables . . . women's movement between and among a variety of public institutions and contexts. . . . Women who do not wear hijab in their homeland may choose to wear it in North America in order to assert and affirm their identity in the context of Islamophobia. Further, women may choose to wear hijab for reasons unrelated to nationalist or identity politics, donning the garment as a personalized expression of piety and faith. (157)

40. Leila Ahmed argues that besides the ethical value of the veil, there is a practical one; it is economical: "For women Islamic dress also appears to bring a variety of distinct practical advantages. On the simplest, most material level, it is economical. Women adopting Islamic dress are saved the expense of acquiring fashionable clothes and having more than two or three outfits. The dress also protects them from male harassment" (223). She adds that the veil, by advocating a classless body, goes beyond, not backward to, "Western" fashion. She elaborates:

One way of describing that process that has led in recent decades to the emergence of Islamic dress and affiliations with Islamism as a dominant discourse of social being is in terms of its marking a broad demographic change—a change that has democratized mainstream culture and mores and led to the rise and gradual predominance of a vocabulary of dress and social being defined from below, by the emergent middle class, rather than by the formerly culturally dominant upper and middle classes. . . . This change to sociocultural vernacular is facilitating the assimilation of the newly urban, newly educated middle classes to modernity and to a sexually integrated social reality. From this perspective Islamic dress can be seen as the uniform, not of reaction, but of transition; it can be seen, not as a return to traditional dress, but as the adoption of Western dress—with modifications to make it acceptable to the wearer's notions of propriety. Far from indicating that the wearers remain fixed in the world of tradition and the past, then, Islamic dress is the uniform of arrival, signaling entrance into, and determination to move forward in, modernity. (224-225)

41. Omayma does not like the old furniture at Eyad's parents' house and cares most about the way in which—not the content of-- religious speeches are given.

42. By the same token, Kahf argues in her short non-fiction narrative, "The Call of Inshallah," that one does not have to repeat religious words in order for them to be defined as Muslim. She refers to the word *Inshallah*, which in Arabic literally means God's willing, and sometimes gets abused by some Arabs and Muslims who use it all the time in meaningless way. Kahf differentiates between appearing or sounding religious and being religious.

43. See Kahf's "Braiding the Stories," in which she examines the contribution of women's words in early Islamic texts (149). Kahf correctly insists that the contribution of early Muslim women is not "incidental" (149). She advocates the need to recover these women's voices as "interlocutors" (149) rather than merely viewing their contributions as "incidental" (149).

44. For an analysis of the reasons why Arab Americans should seek “interethnic solidarity” with other minority groups, see Steven Salaita’s *Anti-Arab Racism in the USA*. Salaita argues, “Since the racism Arab Americans face is also directed at other minorities, it seems only logical for Arab Americans to demystify stereotypes in conjunction with the minorities at whom racism has traditionally been directed” (95).

Chapter Two

1. See introduction

2. Diana Abu-Jaber says: “My father always wanted to return to Jordan . . . and he raised us to think of ourselves as Arab women, instilled with Arab values and beliefs. This was frequently a confusing, frustrating, and mysterious way to be raised, but it always offered lots of interesting material and great food . . . I still have ‘divided’ sense of self” (*American Biographies* 2).

3. Though Abu-Jaber confirms artistic responsibility, she does not operate from a necessity to represent Arab American culture in her writings. For example, in an interview with Robin E. Field, she asserts that art in general is didactic in the sense that it teaches the reader a lesson about characters different from themselves. Identifying with those characters trains the readers to sympathize with one another:

As far as an obligation or responsibility, I do feel I have responsibility to create as true and multilayered a character experience as I can. I'm very interested in the experience of empathy and creating a connection with the reader. The best thing a novelist can do is create characters that you really connect with, because if you feel with your characters, then I think that it enables us to feel with other people. Novels are tutorials in how to connect and empathize with others. Novels are one of the very few forms that we have available to really instruct us in the experiences of others. So I do take that very seriously. But it's not a cultural responsibility—it's more about art. (211)

4. For full analyses of the food motif in the novel, though not in relation to spirituality per se, see, for instance, Nouri Gana and Amal Abdelrazek. Evaluating the importance of food in the novel, Somaya S. Sabry argues: “Cooking becomes a vehicle for artistic expression, a source for sensual pleasure, an opportunity for resistance and even power” (6). Lorraine Mercer and Linda Strom observe that in “this world of slippery identities, it is the food that often keeps the characters centered” (41); they see the subject of food in the novel as a “contact zone” (39). Atef Laouyene says that the discussion of the food themes in the novel goes beyond the exotic understanding of Arabic food and the representation of “ethnic” food. On the cultural context of the food themes in the novel, Laouyene helpfully clarifies: “Abu-Jaber’s food tropes are postexotic, not because they indicate the inevitable hybridity of subjectivities and discourses, but rather because they ground foods and culinary cultures within concrete historical, social, and political contexts” (167). Laouyene adds, “Abu-Jaber dissipates the aura of the exotic surrounding ethnic food by turning it into the central metaphor for historical loss and collective mourning” (181). Further, Tawfiq Yousef accurately describes the relationship between the subjects of food and storytelling in *Crescent* as

such: “both food and storytelling become basic elements in the search for identity and both stir a feeling of nostalgia to the Arab homeland associated with food and the Arabian Nights” (230). Similarly, Mehta Brinda J. Mehta sees the food and the storytelling cultures in the novel as a manifestation of Arab American identity. Describing the political role of Sirine’s food-making process, Mehta argues: “As a female chef with a mission to mediate past memories while creating new paradigms based on present experiences, Sirine becomes a culinary cultural agent in her own right. She politicizes the kitchen as a diasporic space catering to a community of locals, exiles, and international students through the vehicle of food” (206). However, Mehta’s underlying assumption is that making food manifests divinity, “The spirituality of a dish is also reflected in the pristine quality of its presentation and preparation in adherence with the Qur’anic codes of hygiene and purification” (210). She adds, “Sirine’s culinary mastery is capable of transporting the body beyond its customary ability to taste and smell into the realm of the sublime, just as the devotee’s ability expertise connects him/her with the transcendence of the soul in ecstasy” (211). Clearly, I do not grant Mehta’s claim that the food culture in the novel “serves” religion.

5. I agree with Gana that “the novel does not tarry with a sterile polemic or a journalistic apportioning of blame, but instead interrogates the political against the multiplicity of the quotidian in ways that make readers think for themselves about the travesties of politicizing culture and defusing the heterogeneous experiences of Arab lives into homogenous totalities. Abu-Jaber succeeds in drawing a complex tableau of Arab American subjectivities” (237).

6. Abdelrazek correctly notes the close relationship between the main plot and the subplot: “Even though the tale seems separate from and unrelated to the main story, the tale subtly weaves through the main story with its indirect references to issues associated with exile, border crossings, and shifting notions of home” (213).

7. For an analysis of this point, see Nicole Waller. Also, chapter 3 analyzes the trickster figure in another Arab American novel, Randa Jarrar’s *A Map of Home*.

8. On this debate, see Carol Fadda-Conrey .

9. Abu-Jaber elaborates on this topic with her interviewer Field: “If there’s any social agenda in what I do, that is probably the number one thing: trying to counteract the media portrayals—the terrorist for the Arab man and the oppressed, hidden, exotic Arab woman. I talk about them in terms of diversity and humanity. I think the best way that comes through is by addressing vulnerability” (220).

10. Unlike Kahf, Abu-Jaber offers an outsider’s portrayal of the mosque. Yet, she makes a subtle point when describing the socio-economic contexts of the mosque, as opposed to seeing it as an unworldly apolitical space:

Each of the rooms along the corridor have gold plates inscribed with their names There’s a podium with a spray of yellow roses, and huddled at the center of the big room, a loose ring of chairs and perhaps seventeen or eighteen women. A handful of the women are fully cloaked in veils and floor-length black dress; the rest are dressed in pants and cardigans, jeans and blouses. (188)

11. In his *Modern Arab American Fiction*, Salaita, in passing, refers to this scene as a “public fall out” (105), but he does not take issue with the problem of the veil.

12. At the age of fourteen, Han gets seduced by Janet, an American woman (her exact age is not mentioned but from the narrator’s description, she could be in her thirties), who is staying with her husband in Iraq. Janet does not see Han as a teen. She perceives him as a sex object. Likewise, Han conceives of her as a racialized body. They have sex on multiple occasions. Discovering the betrayal, the husband gets angry, not because of his wife’s extramarital sex per se, but due to the fact it happens with an Arab. It is the racial “germs” that he worries about. Janet explains to Han this complicated sexual-racial fear, “there’ve been other men in my life And he knows it. But I’ve never seen him so upset before. Perhaps it’s because you’re an Arab” (257). Though the qualifier “[p]erhaps” lessens the harshness of this moment of racism, it does not eliminate it. For a thorough psychological-racial analysis of interracial sexual dynamics, see Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*. The sex between Han and Janet is characterized by the colonial aspect of controlling the colonized’s native language: “he mistakenly whispered his feeling in Arabic and she shook her head and said, *no, speak English*” (252).

13. Han and his friends see those white women within an Occidental lens:

Han slipped in between the scrubs and found himself transported to a world of long legs, red nails, crystal eyes, rows of pale women on chaise lounges arrayed around a perfect full moon of blue water. . . . Most of the women at the pool had no jobs or income of their own. They oiled themselves and read romance novels and titled mirrors under their chins. Han had trouble imagining that they could be of the same species as the women in his village—women constantly at work clearing rice, threshing wheat, sweeping the floors, embroidering sheets, their skin toughened, eyes radiating lines from years of looking across fields and high walls of camel thorn climbing into the sun. (242-244)

14 . *Encyclopedia of Religion and Society* states: “In social scientific use, a generic term for religious commitment (‘religiousness’) as potentially measurable along more than a single dimension” (406).

15. Saba Mahmood emphasizes that habitus is

Aristotelian in origin and adopted by the three monotheistic traditions, this older meaning of habitus [“one that addresses the centrality of gestural capacities in certain traditions of moral cultivation”] refers to a specific pedagogical process by which moral virtues are acquired through a coordination of outward behavior (bodily acts, social demeanor) with inward dispositions (emotion states, thoughts, intentions). Thus habitus in this usage refers to a conscious effort at reorienting desires, brought about by the concordance of inward motives, outward actions, inclinations, and emotional states through the repeated practice of virtuous deeds. (“Feminist Theory, Agency” 128)

She also explains how Aristotle sees the body and the soul as inseparable (150). I am critical of Mahmood’s overlooking of the role of unconscious in formulating habitus.

16. I partially subscribe to Mahmood's sophisticated definition of agency. However, I argue that she fails to account for the fact that some bodies do not want to serve souls. And some selves choose to connect body and soul without performing set religious practices (as manifested in *Crescent*). Yet these selves cannot do so if they happen to live in a society which enforces one singular definition of piety—as is the case with some Arab countries, for instance.

17. "She's used to men's attentions, their desire to impress her or just keep her listening—a quiet, captive audience behind a counter and a chopping block" (62). Sirine has "always had more men in her life than she's known what to do with. Um-Nadia says that attraction is Sirine's special talent—a sort of magnetism deeper in her cells than basic beauty or charm. . . . She wonders sometimes if it's sort of flaw or lack in her—the inability to lose herself in someone else" (40).

18. For example, the customers at Nadia's Café "love to watch Sirine, with her skin so pale it has the bluish cast of skim milk, her wild blond head of hair, and her sea-green eyes" (20).

19. The subplot confirms the main plot's argument regarding the inseparability of sexuality and spirituality. Even though it is a love story, it begins with a talk about prayers. Expecting to hear a typical beginning of love stories, Sirine is surprised when her uncle, the narrator of the subplot, begins the story as follows: "Abdelrahman Salahadin was a sensitive man. He never forgot to bathe before his prayers. Sometimes he knelt on the beach and made the sand his prayer carpet" (18). Seeing this as contradictory, she wonders: "Wait a second—you said this is the story of how to fall in love? Is there even a woman in this one?" (18) Here, the uncle voices the statement of the novel about the inseparability between love and spirituality: "Take my word for it . . . Love and prayer are intimately related" (18). As the story progresses, the reader realizes that prayers here do not refer to a ritualistic movement but to a wish from God. Abdelrahman is more of a trickster than a religious person.

20. As explained in the introduction, Foucault famously through habitus and institutions teaches us that modern power does not come from above; it is not hierarchical or singular. Power positions in relation to one another and they do so in a mobile way. In this case, sex does not have a prior existence to power. Power is an inherent constituent of sex:

Relations of power are not in a position of exteriority with respect to other types of relationships (economic processes, knowledge relationships, sexual relations), but are immanent in the latter; they are the immediate effects of the divisions, inequalities, and disequilibriums which occur in the latter, and conversely they are the internal conditions of these differentiations; relations of power are not in superstructural positions, with merely a role of prohibition or accompaniment; they have a directly productive role, wherever they come into play. (94)

21. bell hooks, too, states: "The totality of our received body image, our inherited body politics is always that of bondage—the body taken over, stripped of its own agency and made to serve the will, desire, and needs of other" (67).

22. "Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (Foucault 95).

23. I agree with Anthony Giddens that Foucault “puts too much emphasis upon sexuality at the expense of gender. He is silent about the connection of sexuality with romantic love” (24).

24. This is an example of the detailed description of their love-sharing and “body-sharing.”

He circles her with arms and hums something with the rising and falling of Arabic music, and they move around the living room floor—not quite a dance, but more than a shuffle. They laugh and turn over the beige carpet, past the stacks of books, pages and pages of notes, pencils, index cards, pads. She sees things in swipes—coffee rings on papers, rumpled shirts, loose socks. The orderly, precise room of their first date is gone. They dance around open books, open music cassettes, a few plates covered with crumbs, coffee cups stuck to saucers, over a couple of crumpled student papers, and finally into the bedroom. She’s all giddy laughter. A tiny voice in her head warns her that she should just slow down for a moment—try to get her bearings. But instead she lets him pull her on top of him as he falls back on the bed, the two of them rolling around each other like rolling together down a hill. He holds her close and they start kissing so deeply she can barely catch her breath; colored lights flash behind her eyes. Han tugs at his shirt, ignoring the buttons, lifting it straight over his head. She hikes her skirt around her hips and skims her panties off. She climbs on top of Han but then he flips her and lifts her hips, entering her from above, their lovemaking intense and silent, the giddiness spilling away. When she comes, she closes her eyes and feels again as if she is flying forward through the length of her body. Then they make love again, barely resting in between. They make love too many times until both of them feel burnt and half skinned. She inhales the scent on the inside of his neck and inside his hair. The smell of cult. They rub their feet against each other, kiss and shift around and can’t find a place to put their arms. She is buzzing with her desire, from their stream of kisses, from the exotic night in a still strange room, the two-horned moon framed in the balcony door, tipped and waiting like a goblet to be filled. And when they finally fall asleep it is like falling into a well, echoing bottomless, and dark. (156-7)

This scene brilliantly illustrates the novel’s embracement of a broader definition of sexuality. Abu-Jaber’s employment of sounds and scenes are a success. It points out how the narrative shows the readers, not merely tell the readers, minute details about the world of the senses.

25. When Sirine qualifies her mother’s cooking lessons as a simple thing, Han, who has always liked to accompany of his mother and female relatives at the kitchen, corrects her: ““That’s quite serious, that’s metaphysical”” (68).

26. On the use of Arabic words in *Crescent*, see Mazen Naous.

27. One’s relationship to food in the novel reflects their love of life or lack thereof. The characters who are engaged in producing and consuming food are those who love life and who are working on maintaining their spiritual growth. For example,

Nathan's relationship to food is disrupted by the rupture of his love life—by the death of his lover, Han's sister. She has been killed by Saddam Houssein's regime for hosting an American at her family's house. Like Sirine, Nathan connects to his soul through his relationship with his bodily activities, namely consuming food. But after the death of his beloved, he loses his interest in food. He tells Sirine, "I used to feel like the closer I was to physical things, the closer I got to the soul" (97). He says, "I don't really like food much" (59). Instead of the physical relationship with food, Nathan's spiritual loss leads him to a meta-relationship with food. He takes pictures of food. This relation to food surprises Koorosh, the owner of a Persian grocery store, who shockingly describes to Sirine the items of which Nathan takes pictures: "Crazy stuff. Boxes of tissues, baby food, celery. He makes me too nervous. I said he'd feel better if he ate some food instead of making pictures of it" (153).

28. Paraphrasing her mother, Sirine says:

baklava-maker should have sensitive, supple hands, so she was in charge of opening and unpeeling the upper-thin layers of dough and placing them in a stack in the tray. Her father was in charge of pastry-brushing each layer of dough with a coat of drawn butter. It was systematic yet graceful: her mother carefully unpeeling each layer and placing them in the tray where Sirine's father painted them. It was important to move quickly so that the unbuttered layers didn't dry out and start to fall apart. This was one of the ways that Sirine learned how her parents loved each other—their concerted movements like a dance; they swam together through the round arcs of her mother's arms and her father's tender strokes. (66)

Making baklava is a metaphor for making love. Both call for particular rhythm and chemistry.

29. Omar Khayyam is a famous medieval Persian poet, philosopher, and mathematician, whose perspective on religion is hard to pin down. Some see him as a Sufi; others perceive him as an agnostic; yet others identify some of his ideas as orthodox.

30. Audre Lorde has got the erotic-cultural dynamics right:

The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling. In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change. For women, this has meant a suppression of the erotic as a considered source of power and information within ourselves. (53)

Chapter Three

1. In one interview, Jarrar says that *A Map of Home* reflects her relationship with her family and with her culture (Beirut 39), but in another she stresses the fact that the novel is not an autobiography (Zocalo). The point is there are similarities as well as differences between Jarrar's life and Nidali's.

2. Salaita, too, observes, “Waheed is not the stereotypical Arab male of American lore, though he does exhibit a need for too much control over Nidali’s decision. Nevertheless, he is too multifaceted to be read as a simple representation of one or a few things: he fits nicely into Jarrar’s pattern of writing contradictions into singular characters and situations” (“Potpourri: Alicia Erian, Randa Jarrar, Susan Abulhawa” 132).

3. Werner Sollors relies on Freud’s theories of jokes. In *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud argues, “jokes require a social realm in which they are told and shared” (132).

4. See the introduction

5. Here, I share the premise of Leon Rappoport, which is in tune with the underlying assumption of Alan Dundes: ethnic humor “*plays with stereotypes and exploits them, but it does not create them*. Writers and comedians are not guilty of inventing the stereotypes or the slurs and obscenities that often accompany them” (emphasis in original 151).

6. See Joseph Boskin. But I want to note that I am not interested in how Boskin defines the trickster motif, “whereby a minority member scores by counting a specific insult delivered by a member of the majority” (46), because it implies the immorality of the trickster and his cause of antagonism, though I use him as a link between my sections.

7. In this regard, I agree with Creek-Cherokee critic Craig S. Womack, who wonders: “what is there to write about that is more important than Native authors testifying to surviving genocide and advocating sovereignty and survival?” (7)

8. Gerald Vizenor says, “Survivance stories honor the humor and tragic wisdom of the situation, not the market value of victimry” (*Postindian Conversations* 37).

9. A full analysis of the *Quranic* representation in the novel is outside the scope of this chapter. On this topic, see Sabiha Sorgun.

10. This is an example of how humor targets “Logic. The humor is ideational” (Berger 17).

11. On *A Map of Home*’s use of bilingualism, see Mohammed Albakry and Jonathan Siler. Using a linguistic approach, they expand on Carol Fadda-Conrey’s definition of “ethnic Borderland.” In light of this concept, they argue that Randa Jarrar’s “bilingual creativity” (110) creates a “dynamic borderland space,” where the novel’s particular use of both English and Arabic reflects the hybridized identity of the female protagonist.

12. In his “Gazing East from the Americas,” Steven Salaita uses the term “gaze” to explain how Arab American authors employ Eastern cultural materials in their writings to produce distinctive Arab literature in the US. Consequently, their gaze is “an inverted form of the traditional [colonial] gaze” (133). Clearly, my chapter adds the female gaze.

13. For instance, Miriam Cook complains: “Some of the sex scenes are so explicit, they are unnerving” (37). Likewise, Weisman judges, “the only negative is that the novel is perhaps unnecessarily laced with strong language, which make it less universally appealing” (68).

14. To cite one case, Dina Jadallah expects a true representation of Palestinian history. She worries about how Jarrar “airs the dirty laundry” of the patriarchy of the father in public (112).

15. On lesbian feminisms, Nancy Walker rightly argues: “For lesbian feminists, the issue at stake is far larger than sexual preference; it involves the ability of women to define themselves *for* themselves rather than being defined by men or their relationships with men” (emphasis in original 160). Heterosexual women are encouraged to consider homosexuality as an alternative/ equal way of defining one’s sexual identity so as to disrupt normal male dominance. Also, they are encouraged to become allies to lesbian feminists. Jarrar identifies herself as bisexual.

16. Here, I agree with Vizenor’s astute observation that trickster stories “break out of the heavy burdens of tradition with a tease of action and a sense of chance” (*Postindian* 60).

17. On the use of the grotesque and the obscene in relation to the question of state and colonial authorities, see both Mikhail Bakhtin and Achille Mbembe’s chapter 3.

18. In most Arab countries, virginity is symbolized by the presence or absence of the hymen. This is ridiculous, because assuming that a flesh-based virginity is a value, such value cannot be tested against anal sex, homosexual relations, sex that may not include penetration.

19. Referring to the *Quran*, Sorgun also acknowledges Nidali’s liberated sexuality (80).

Chapter Four

1. See, for instance, Lisa Rohrbaugh. Also, Maya Abou-Youssef Hayward states, in the introduction to her interview with Serageldin that, *The Cairo House* “is a compelling representation of what it is to lead a hyphenated identity, to try to come to terms with two cultures, two time periods, and two ways of life” (85). In the interview, Serageldin confirms the hyphenated identity that she embodies as a writer. She argues that especially after the catastrophe of 9/11/ 2001, the boundaries between the public and the private or the personal and the political have been blurred. She elaborates:

For the very private person I have always been, it comes as a bitter realization that, in the post-September 11 world, there is no place for the chameleon to hide. Even the private world of the writer is inexorably politicized, with a new awareness that the nature of representations of Arabs in the media, in literature, and in the entertainment industry, are likely to have far-reaching consequences. (136)

This politicization creates an issue for writers, Serageldin argues, because publishers expect writers to develop representational literatures. She argues for writing “‘from the heart.’” I take this to mean writing honestly and individualistically without worrying too much about being judged or being representational.

2. A key reference to consult on this topic is Rabab Abdulhadi, et al.’s *Arab & Arab American Feminisms*.

3. In this regard, Kadi makes a passionate argument with which I agree:

As a working class person who thinks a lot about class and perceives the way it impacts people in our daily lives, I simply cannot stress the importance of this issue enough and the need for all caring, thinking people to take this issue seriously. Of course, I include feminism in the phrase ‘caring, thinking people.’ To me feminism is at its root concerned with justice for all living beings, and a cornerstone of justice is that basic needs of food, shelter, and dignified, safe work are met. These are critical class issues (culture springs to mind as another), but they are cornerstone ones, and working-poor and working-class people are routinely deprived of these basic needs. (244)

4. Mona Mikhail rightly puts Serageldin’s immigrant narratives in the context of upper-class Egyptian women’s immigration to the United States in the 60s, seeking better lives and better education. As such, she describes Serageldin as “one of those ‘border intellectuals’” (515).

5. According to *Online Etymology Dictionary*, the word *Pasha* refers to a “Turkish honorary title formerly given to officers of high rank, 1640s, from Turk. *Pasha*, earlier basha, from bash "head, chief." Similarly, according to *Oxford English Dictionary*: *Pasha* is a

Turkish officer of high rank, as a military commander or a provincial governor (now hist.). Also in extended use. Pasha was the highest official title of honour in the Ottoman Empire. It was also used in the Turkish Republic until 1934, when all Ottoman titles were abolished. In everyday speech, however, the title Pasha is still sometimes used after the given names of well-known generals and admirals. The title was also used in former Ottoman possessions in the Middle East and North Africa. Cf. the earlier bashaw

Further, in *The Pasha*, Letitia W. Ufford explains:

There were many pashas. The title is not a hereditary one, just as the Ottoman Empire did not have a hereditary aristocracy. Pasha was, under the Ottomans, “the highest official title of honor.” It was given to both civil and military officials. A pasha was a minister of state, a governor of a province, a general at the head of military campaign. The extreme flexibility of the social system meant that he might well have been sold as a child to be brought up in the Sultan’s court or in a wealthy household. He might be picked among other such slaves as the future spouse of his owner’s daughter and even marry the daughter of a Sultan. Or, he might have belonged to a long line of government bureaucrats or feudal warlords. (9)

In relation to the specific use of the Pasha title in the novel, Mona Mikhail informs readers: “Fouad Pasha, uncle of the author, is undoubtedly the protagonist-custodian of a whole class and clan. His long reign extended till the summer of 2000 when he passed on after a protracted illness” (515).

6. See Serageldin’s personal blog: <http://samiaserageldin.blogspot.com/p/radio-interviews-about-revolution.html>.

7. Commenting on the value of *The Cairo House* in the field of Arab American literature, critic Mona Mikhail observes, “Samia Serageldin has written a fine first novel.” *The Cairo House* is a welcome addition to the growing library of works by Arab/Egyptian Americans, and makes for thoroughly enjoyable reading” (516).

8. For example, Serageldin explains that when the catastrophe of 9/11 happened, her fears and anxiety were caused first by being an American mother and second by being a Muslim. In the same interview, she informs the readers that writing *The Cairo House* in the form of a novel, as opposed to memoir, though the latter would have been more marketable, enables her to write more truthfully without worrying about offending her family (87).

9. On this topic, Waïl Hassan states: “Minority writers have to address and engage dominant readers if they are to make a change [I]t is not enough for the marginalized autobiographer to undermine socially constructed identity; he/she must be able to engage the dominant discourse dialogically in order for his/her intervention to negotiate a viable identity effectively” (9). I agree on the need to address mainstream audience. However, I do not see that Serageldin’s *The Cairo House* offers, or needs to offer, corrective messages for Western audiences.

10. An explanation of the economic distribution in Egypt, a major factor in determining social class, before and after the 1952 revolution merits consideration. In his recent *Egypt on the Brink*, Tarek Osman provides useful statistics:

In 1950, more than one-third of all fertile land was owned by less than 0.5 per cent of Egyptians, while another third was shared among 95 per cent of mostly poor farmers. Such vast concentration, in a mainly agrarian economy where land was almost the only real reservoir of wealth, entailed a major skewing of wealth generation and accumulation--not only in agriculture and agribusiness, but across all economic fronts. The distorted landownership structure lay at the heart of injustices Nasser wished to purge. (54-5)

Nasser redistributed land according to the Land Reform Act in 1952. “Land reform was enforcing a 100-acre ceiling on the size of any single family’s holding; ending absentee ownership; capping rent on leased lands; strengthening the legal rights of peasants (al-fellahin); and, crucially, confiscating hundreds of thousands of fertile acres from major landowners and distributing them to millions of landless peasants” (55). The agrarian redistribution extended to industrial as well as business retribution:

This new class of state-owned factories, companies and enterprise was, as with the land-reform drive, in effect in the late 1950s and early 1960s from the proceeds of the nationalization of almost all of Egypt’s sizable businesses. The underlying philosophy was also similar: to remodel the structure of wealth by transferring ownership from a narrow capitalist at the very top of the country’s socio-economic pyramid to millions of ordinary employees, poor labourers and struggling workers. This newly created public sector was also the vehicle through which Nasser launched a major industrialization drive (55).

Clearly, many Egyptian elites, to which Serageldin belongs, condemn to this day the social and economic changes brought by Nasser and do not embrace his nationalist

socialist enterprise. Osman explains, “Nasser’s detractors accuse him of vulgar populism . . . and deep hatred of liberal capitalism” (56).

11. Similarly, Jerome de Groot argues that novels and history offer narratives of events. These events are only accessible through narration and so their truth is constructed, not inherent or natural. He says: “Both novelist and historian are using trope, metaphor, prose, narrative style to interpret and render a version of something which is innately other and unknown” (113).

12. For a fuller historical account of feminism in Egypt from 1920s to 1960s, see A. Kahter and C Nelson’s “Al-harakah Al-Nissa’iyah,” which offers a thorough and complex analysis of the development of Egyptian women’s rights movements of that period. The paper draws readers’ attention to the fact that the “period from 1945 until 1959 is usually overlooked in most analyses on the women’s movement in Egypt.” It argues, “it is precisely during this period that women’s movement comes of age in the sense that: (a) it experiences a diversification in ideology, tactics, and goals; and (b) it begins to transcend its elitist origins and membership” (465). More relevant to the approach adopted in this chapter, Kahter’s and Nelson’s essay operates from a postmodern underlying assumption, namely different ideologies work for different groups of people:

Some adopted a liberal ideology which emphasized the importance of mobilizing forces to bring educated middle class women into the political institutions of decision making on the premise that these women constituted the most potent force for reform in the society. Others opted for a more radical analysis of women’s inferior position in society arguing that only through bringing the struggle for women’s rights out of the halls of institutionalized power and into the popular neighborhood and by addressing the issues that emanate from the realities of working class women that it can become an effective force for change. (465)

The paper offers a clear definition of the term “class” in an Egyptian milieu and it points out the potential problems that arise from using Western definitions of feminism without paying close attention to differences. Alternatively, it defines feminism in a way that is wary of various social classes, nationalist, and cultural progressions (466). This article is, rightly, critical of elitist apolitical pre-revolution Egyptian feminism; for instance, observing the progression of Egyptian feminism across class consciousness, Kahter and Nelson argue, “the women’s movement consciously shifts away from being a welfare oriented, mostly philanthropic activity, to a more politicized movement that links the liberation of women to other political and social concerns such as the nationalist movement and class struggle” (465-466).

13. In this regard, de Groot says, “the techniques of postmodernism . . . have become the techniques of the modern historical novel. Questioning the legitimacy of narrative and undermining authority are fundamental to the ways that contemporary novelists approach the past” (108). He adds that “All historical novels are, ultimately, pastiche reworkings and reimaginings of interpreted and unsubstantiated factual narratives” (115).

14. I do not see *The Cairo House* as historical metafiction. Here, I rely on Hutcheon's well-known definition of the genre: "Historiographic metafiction . . . keeps distinct its formal auto-representation and its historical context, and in so doing problematizes the very possibility of historical knowledge, because there is no conciliation, no dialectic here – just unresolved contradiction" (106).

15. Carol Fadda-Conrey identifies Joe Kadi as of "Lebanese racial and cultural heritage, Kadi is a writer, cultural critic, poet, musician, and activist who focuses on lesbian, working-class, feminist, and ethnic concerns. She was born and raised in Oshawa, Canada and has worked closely with Arab communities in Canada and the United States, fighting against anti-Arab racism and various forms of class oppression and violence" (157).

16. In this, Kadi is similar to other marginalized postmodern writers and artists with origins in the social margins.

17. Kadi argues:

Taking these experiences (abuses) and theorizing about them is fraught with difficulties. First, there are emotions. I've only been able to theorize about this abuse after doing a lot of healing. At earlier stage in this work, I felt too much pain to think concretely about what happened and what it meant. Only recently have I been able to set my abuse history in a more analytical, reflective framework. Which does not mean leaving my feelings behind, or thinking 'objectively' about these issues. For me, that's not possible or desirable. (70)

18. For a more detailed historical analysis of habitus, see the introduction and chapter two.

19. This reminds me of Louis Althusser's concept of "interpellation" and Michel Foucault's theory of bio-power. The latter works through subjects to produce more knowledge, which, in turn, creates more power.

20. See introduction

21. On the analysis of classist ideologies of Egyptian neighborhood, see Magda, especially p. 209-246.

22. The reader is informed that although according to Egyptian laws an Egyptian wife cannot leave the country without a written permission from her husband, such laws are not implemented unless the husband reports to the airport officials.

23. Serageldin states:

Nasser's sequestration decree went far beyond the confiscation of wealth or the stripping of civil liberties. It was the sharply-honed instrument of his malice: it emasculated, it isolated, it muzzled, it humiliated, it stigmatized; it forced retirement on men in their prime; it immured them in their own homes. If the diffuse gloom that hung in the air at home had an effect on Gigi, it was to teach her a sort of precocious tact. She learned to be unquestioning and accepting, in order to spare the adults who imagined they were shielding her. (44)

24. See chapter 2.

25. The narrator informs the readers that Gihan

never heard her father talk about his experiences in the internment camps. At home he spent hours smoking in an armchair; lost in his thoughts. He had no land or business left to run. According to the sequestration decrees that applied to most of the men in the families affected, he was barred from practicing law or belonging to a professional syndicate or even a social club. Like a prisoner on parole, he could not leave the city without clearance from the authorities, nor leave the country under any circumstances. His revolver and passport were confiscated. (44)

26. For example, when Gihan's uncle Makhoul's daughter reaches the age of marriage, he complains to Shamel, Gihan's father: "I wouldn't marry a daughter of mine into a family with such 'modern' notions. It's a scandal how his sisters drive their own cars and smoke in public" (37).

27. I agree with Arlene Elowe MacLeod's argument that the dominance of the veil in Egypt at that point in history was caused by a political reason:

This movement initiated as a political and religious statement in the universities after the 1967 and 1973 wars with Israel . . . and has over the years been transformed into a new movement with different adherents and reasoning.

Women's stories illustrate some of the controversies which are provoked by this increasingly common pattern in lower-middle-class Cairo. (541-542)

28. Different from Samia Serageldin, who perceives the veil as backward and sees it outside of a larger sociopolitical context, Arlene E. MacLeod views the increase of this phenomenon as a manifestation of power struggles unresolved and continuous. In this analysis, she extends Antonio Gramsci's explanation of hegemony to Egyptian women:

In the case of lower-middle-class women in Cairo, two important signs reinforce the need to think of hegemony as a mode of political struggle rather than a process of top-down domination. First, these veils are a new kind of covering clothing. In Cairo, lower-middle-class women have been wearing Western clothes for some years now; Western dress signified modernity and women's ability to be equal partners in aiding Egypt's recovery and growth. Women are not simply clinging to the past; covering clothes have not been their normal dress for many years. Indeed, the dress these women are putting on is not even the traditional dress of their mothers or grandmothers but a quite distinct and new style, clearly distinguished from the traditional garb of lower-class women. The second sign of struggle is that this is a movement initiated by women themselves. Women have the right, which they exercise, to decide what dress they will wear; covering dress is considered a personal decision a woman makes in her heart and not a matter her husband can decide for her. So the new veiling cannot be explained as the maintenance of traditional ways or as the revival of a traditional symbol at men's insistence. The controversies over voluntary veiling in lower-middle-class Cairo alert us to the complexity of women's "consent" and lead to the question of what this new dress signifies as part of a hegemonic struggle. (544-545)

I find MacLeod's perception more convincing.

Chapter Five

1. Here I build on Steven Salaita's use of "gaze, in reference to "how Arab American authors employ Eastern cultural materials in their writings to produce Arab literature in the US. Thus, their "gaze" is actually "an inverted form of the traditional gaze," the gaze in which the Arab is an abject being, for instance, via the colonial gaze ("Gazing East from the Americas" 133).

2. See Fitzpatrick 209.

3. Marilyn Booth, Iraqi Professor of Arabic Studies at Edinburgh University and translator of El Saadawi's *Memoirs from the Women's Prison*, notes, "she has drawn admiration, fury, emulation, verbal abuse, grant money, persecution, multilanguage publication and many speaking opportunities, prison, loyalty, disillusionment, acclaim, critique, applause, and silence" (8).

4. El Saadawi established the Arab Women's Solidarity Association in 1982, a project which the Egyptian government tried to terminate. Her aim has been to voice Egyptian gender injustices at the hands of national patriarchal powers as well as neoliberal capitalism (Booth 8). Rehnema Sazzad observes that this association "was closed down due to pressure from Saudi Arabia and the Islamist political groups in Egypt, whose connection to imperialism *Saadawi* boldly voices" (822).

5 See, for example, Diana Royer; Fedwa Malti-Douglas (1995); Jūrj Ṭarābīshī, and Nawāl Sa'dāwī; and Nawāl Sa'dāwī; and Adele S. N. Horst.

6. See *Representations of the Intellectual* 52, 63.

7. In this way, she is the antithesis of Samia Serageldin, who provides readers with an elitist perspective of the same historical periods in Egypt.

8. "Her novels, like her activism, are starkly polarizing . . . most critics steer clear, preferring to focus their energies on fictions of more complex construction, language, and character" (Booth 8).

9. Jane Housham dismisses the novel as an embodiment of a sick culture (19). She sees the emphasis on body parts to be reflection of El Saadawi's profession as a psychiatrist and reads the character Bodour as a psychically ill person. "El Saadawi's training as a psychiatrist perhaps helped her to write this disturbing, oneiric novel in which the sanity of Bodour, a well-to-do Egyptian woman, gives way to frightening psychosis . . . Dissociated, depersonalized, and returning constantly to the same obsessive tropes—genitalia, fat white fingers, rape, castration fantasies— her story is repetitive, non-linear, punishing" (19).

10. "The obese and anorectic are . . . disturbing partly because they embody resistance to cultural norms" (203).

11. "Her body was light and agile. She was like a white butterfly in her Egyptian cotton dress running among the trees . . . frizzy hair that stood like black wires. A girl with this kind of hair was the object of people's scorn, for girls from good families had long smooth hair falling softly down their backs. Their hair submitted easily to the movement of the gentle breeze and the fingers of their husbands after marriage" (48).

12. Unlike her illegitimate sister Zeina, Mageeda uses her patrilineal name uncritically. The narrator informs us that the “name al-Khartiti seemed to her like a deformed limb affixed to her name and her body” (26).

13. Also different from Bordo, El Saadawi’s portrayal of male sexuality is all negative. El Saadawi’s multiple examples of male rapists and males who use their sexuality against the law seems to suggest that all men are like that.

Some critics take this stance against El Saadawi. Adrian Turpin, for instance, judges her male portrayal in *Zeina* as sexist, for she portrays all men as bad: “Institutionalised sexual and religious hypocrisy are the targets. But the line between characterisation and character assassination is thin. Almost every man in this book is a rapist or a paedophile, suggesting a lack of discrimination that compromises El Saadawi's assault on the patriarchy” (15).

14. These issues are different in the West, where institutional laws apply to rape crimes. In the East, however, women are almost always blamed for their own rape and are often seen as sinful persons rather than as victims. The difference is not in ideology. Women are generally blamed for their being raped, a crime which gets attributed to their clothes. It lies in the presence or absence of laws, which may either encourage or prevent the application of those laws. El-Saadawi is right in raising awareness to this major gender problem in Egypt.

By comparison, in *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (see chapter one) Mohja Kahf deals with a similar issue, where the accident of Zuhura’s rape and death are interpreted by Islamists as normal reactions to her liberal attitudes and to her mingling with men at work and for university activities. On another level, her death is seen as an expected Orientalist deed against her religiosity symbolized in her veil. In both cases, Zuhura is blamed. The difference in the cultural context that Kahf deals with is that rape is seen as a crime in the eyes of law. Religious fundamentalists do not sway judges to perceive it as a crime. Ironically, in Kahf’s text, the truth behind the killing remains an enigma.

15. For example, Mary Wollstonecraft suggests that women should be muscular, not to compete with or share with men public activities, but to imitate “manly virtues” (10). In her words:

I wish to persuade women to endeavor to acquire strength, both of mind and body, and to convince them that the soft phrases, susceptibility of heart, delicacy of sentiment, and refinement of taste, are almost synonymous with epithets of weakness. . . . Dismissing, then, those pretty feminine phrases, which the men condescendingly use to soften our slavish dependence, and despising that weak elegance of mind, exquisite sensibility, and sweet *docility* of manners, supposed to be the sexual characteristics of the weaker vessel, I wish to show that elegance is inferior to virtue, that the first object of laudable ambition is to obtain a character as a human being, regardless of the distinction of sex, and that secondary views should be brought to this simple touchstone. (emphasis added 11)

16. In this regard, Wollstonecraft wonders: “Indeed the word masculine is only a bugbear; there is little reason to fear that women will acquire too much courage or

fortitude, for their apparent inferiority with respect to bodily strength must render them in some degree dependent on men in the various relations of life; but why should it be increased by prejudices that give a sex to virtue, and confound simple truths with sensual reveries?" (12).

17 . See Abdalla F. Hassan

18. For instance, *The Washington Post* notes that al-Tahawy is "[u]nveiling the Lives of Egypt's Bedouin Women."

19. (Diamant 1vii).

20. Looking at Egyptian Western Desert Bedouins, Lila Abu-Lughod explains to us the genre of these songs, which she observes as a form of resistance:

These poem/songs, known as *ghinnawas* (little songs), are recited mostly by women and young men, usually in the midst of ordinary conversations between intimates. What is most striking about them is that people express through them sentiments that differ radically from those they express in their ordinary-language conversations, sentiments of vulnerability and love. Many of these songs concern relationships with members of the opposite sex toward whom they respond, outside of poetry, with anger or denial of concern. ("The Romance of Resistance" 46)

She clarifies: "Folktales, songs, and jokes among women are not the only subversive discourses in Bedouin society. Those I have just described, though, indicate the significance of the ideology of sexual difference itself as a form of power" (46). In a later piece, she adds that, though she sees those songs as "subversive," she does not see them as "revolutionary" or as "feminist," (164), and that they are "subversive in that it gives voice to experiences and emotions that lie outside those culturally prescribed as appropriate to obedient daughters and chaste wives -- to modest women" ("Modest Women, Subversive Poems" 164). Developing this debate is outside the scope of this section. Here suffice it to define the genre of these songs.

21. "The emphasis on cure reduces the cultural tolerance for human variation and vulnerability by locating disability in bodies imagined as flawed rather than social systems in need of fixing" (264).

22. I would like to point out that although I find Hubbard's and Siebers's standpoints on Disability Studies suitable for discussing the disabled female bodies in *The Tent*, I am aware that their talk about social justice is not objective; it comes from a leftist perspective. I do not believe that disabled people are generally looked down upon, isolated, or treated differently. Plus I am convinced that what many disabled people really care about is to be cured. Focusing on aspects of social justice, rather than trying to eliminate the physical condition, is political.

23. This claim is similar to Susan Bordo's talk about the ideal image of the body that cultures make. See Nawal El Saadawi section in this chapter.

24. Anne's beliefs and actions are part of a larger discourse. Muslim women get crippled by Orientalists (and Islamists), who disable them from accessing not only public spaces but also their own minds and bodies. Orientalists and Islamophobes see Arab and Muslim cultures at large as disabled.

25. In this context, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson argues, “A feminist disability studies would draw an important distinction between prevention and elimination. Preventing illness, suffering, and injury is a humane social objective. Eliminating the range of unacceptable and devalued bodily forms and functions the dominant order calls disability is, on the other hand, a eugenic undertaking” (264).

26. Thanks to pre-Islamic infanticide of females dominant in Arabia before the advent in Islam.

27. Not incidentally, hair as a motif is common in many other Arab and Arab American women’s literary works. Palestinian American prolific writer Naomi Shihab Nye’s *Habibi*; Jordanian American Laila Halaby’s *West of the Jordan*; plus Syrian American Mohja Kahf’s collection of poetry *E-mails from Scheherazad* are a few examples.

28. John Thurston defines symptomatic reading as such: “Symptomatic reading is used in literary criticism as a means of analyzing the presence of ideology in literary texts. . . . A symptomatic reading uncovers the buried problematic of a text” (638).

29. In their encyclopedia, *Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Arab States Today*, Sebastian Maisel et al. depict Riyadh as follows: “‘the gardens,’ al-Riyadh is the capital of Saudi Arabia. Located in the center of the Arabian Peninsula, it has some 4-5 million inhabitants. Topographically, Riyadh is on a high plateau that is intersected by valleys” (383).

30. Al-Sane talks about her life in Saudi Arabia and the US and the difficulties she faces after publishing her novel in several online videos.

31. In her review essay on *Girls of Riyadh*, Moneera al-Ghadeer reads the novel as a manifestation of the chic lit narrative genre and judges the structure of the novel through the lens of cyberfiction, concluding that the novel’s attempts to critique modernist texts fail, for it “lacks the non-linear and associative nature of hypertexts” characteristic of postmodernist texts (301). Wenche Ommundsen also reads it as a chic lit narrative that deals with local issues. Ommundsen is critical of what she sees as *Girls of Riyadh*’s incomplete revolutionary spirit, “[it] is not a wholesale revolt, and, significantly, it is never aimed against their [the Arab women’s] religion” (114).

32. On this subject, Bourdieu notes, “since she is always ‘the daughter of so and so’ or ‘the wife of so and so’, her honour, the woman’s ‘glory’ are none other than the honour of the group of agnates to which she belongs. She must therefore be on her guard against acting in any way that might prejudice the prestige and reputation of the group. She is the guardian of *esser*.” (223).

33. Abu-Odeh, too, discusses vaginal virginity, “Arab women are supposed to bleed on their wedding night as a result of the breaking of the hymen, and they are supposed to perform a ‘public’ virginity with a certain body ‘style’, the body moving within a defined and delimited social space.” She qualifies these descriptions of virginity as “the vaginal, the bodily, and the social” (150). Her main focus is on the social definition of virginity.

34. In her “Elusive Bodies,” Gabriele von Bruck studies this interesting definition of honor and care. Looking specifically at Yemeni families, she explains that not caring for appearance is considered annoying to mother-in-laws because it shows that the wife does not care about her husband.

35. On multi-layered approaches to the veil adopted by Saudi women who have traveled abroad, Yamani notes:

Even some of those women who were educated abroad during the 1960s and 1970s generally view the veil not as a restriction, but as a normal feature of everyday life. The veil, they explain, has been there for themselves, their mothers and grandmothers, without the interruption that occurred under colonialism in other Muslim societies. They further argue that the veil is a garment that must only be worn outdoors. At any place or occasion, women leave their veils at the door with the cloakroom attendant. Hence, it is compared to a coat and a hat in Europe in bygone days. (“Some Observations on Women in Saudi Arabia” 271)

36. Regarding how the veil affirms, rather than denies, Saudi women’s social class, Yamani says:

The wearing of the veil for some of the wealthy groups has been not an expression of female timidity, but a means of maintaining social distance, placing a barrier between the woman who wears it and the men and women she is in contact with. Some women explain that they veil in their country to maintain the honour of their patronymic group, and not to unnecessarily offend the authorities. . . . When abroad many do not veil since, as they put it, “it would attract more attention than modesty.” (“Some Observations on Women in Saudi Arabia” (271)

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