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**NARRATIVES OF ARAB ANGLOPHONE WOMEN  
AND THE ARTICULATION OF A MAJOR DISCOURSE  
IN A MINOR LITERATURE**

**ABSTRACT:** “It is important to stress that a variety of positions with respect to feminism, nation, religion and identity are to be found in Anglophone Arab women’s writings. This being the case, it is doubtful whether, in discussing this literary production, much mileage is to be extracted from over emphasis of the notion of its being a conduit of ‘Third World subaltern women.’” (Nash 35) Building on Geoffrey Nash’s statement and reflecting on Deleuze and Guattari’s conceptualization of minor literature and Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderland(s)*, we will discuss in this paper how the writings of Arab Anglophone women are specific minor and borderland narratives within minor literature(s) through a tentative (re)localization of Arab women’s English literature into distinct and various categories. By referring to various bestselling English works produced by Arab British and Arab American women authors, our aim is to establish a new taxonomy that may fit the specificity of these works.

**KEY WORDS:** Arab Anglophone literature, Arab Anglophone women’s narratives, minor literature, de-territorialization, re-territorialization, Diaspora, home, cultural translation.

**Introduction**

This paper aims to (re-)locate narratives produced in English by women authors who are Arab British/American immigrants or daughters of early Arab British/American immigrants, for those

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narratives are now widely recognized by Western critics and are of interest to many academics and researchers.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the last few decades have been marked by a significant increase of interest in literary works produced in foreign languages by Arab male and female writers who are described either as *Anglophone* or *hybrid*.<sup>2</sup> Anglophone Arab female writers outnumber male writers.<sup>3</sup> They are either academics and/or intellectuals who migrated to Britain or USA and decided to write in English, or British/American writers who are daughters of the early twentieth century Arab immigrants who settled mainly in the US, and whose mother tongue is English. Interestingly, literary works written by Arab Anglophone women writers—mainly novels and short stories—have brought more recognition and visibility to the Arab Woman whose identity is perceived by the Western readership as being different, peculiar, complex, and mosaic because of her portrayal in the media and in the books of early orientalist.

Certainly, Anglophone Arabic literature, that is, a literature conceived and executed in English by writers of Arabic background, is qualitatively different from Arabic literature and Arabic literature translated into English (Nash 11). This trend of Arabic literature is to be considered as an influence on contemporary international literatures, in particular on the postcolonial, with its theorization of intercultural relations by

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Dr Lindsey Moore (University of Lancaster), Dr Geoffrey Nash (University of Sunderland), Prof Hoda Elsadda (University of Manchester), Dr Anastasia Valassopoulos (University of Manchester), Dr Dalia Mostafa (University of Manchester), Dr Michelle Obeid (University of Manchester), Wail Hassan (University of Illinois), Dr Claire Chambers (University of York), Dr Lindsey Moore (University of Lancaster), and others.

<sup>2</sup> The concepts of cultural hybridity and hybridization that were popularized by Homi Bhabha in the 1990s are widely used in anthropological and cultural studies circles to stand for the process by which cultures around the world adopt a certain degree of homogenized global culture while clinging to aspects of their own traditional culture. The result is a mixture, or hybrid. Hyphenation is also a term used to describe the process whereby young generations of immigrants give birth to ethnic minorities whose hyphen joins two sides of their identities as is the case of Arab American second and third generations.

<sup>3</sup> Female authors who are Arab British include Ahdaf Soueif, Fadia Faqir, Layla Elalami, Betoul Elkhedir, Leila Aboulela and others. Arab American female writers include Mohja Kahf, Diana Abujaber, Layla Elmaleh, Naomi Shehab Nye amongst others. These women have gained literary recognition for their works which created certain cultural and literary bridges between divergent spaces, cultures and peoples as is the case for Soueif's prominent novel, *The Map of Love*.

reference to the impact of colonialism and imperialism on non-Western literatures. The transnational aspect of Anglophone Arabic literature highlights the impact and the effects of globalization. Narratives produced by this category of Arab women writers have often been classified under the labels of postcolonial, feminist, non-native, hybrid or Anglophone literary discourse. It is assumed that, compared with the literature in French produced by North African writers (Algerian, Tunisian or Moroccan) or even Lebanese writers, the list of writings produced by Arabs (mainly from the Middle East) in English was, on the whole, unimpressive. This view has been challenged by an increasing number of English-language works by Arab writers, written mainly by women such as Ahdaf Soueif, Leila Aboulela, Soraya Antonius, Fadia Faqir, and others. Recently, there has been a significant growing interest in these works. More courses are now devoted to Arab Anglophone writings in western universities, many books<sup>4</sup> record and analyze these works and conferences take place which focus on the particularity of this discourse<sup>5</sup>.

However, what has often been problematic is which literary framework best fits these narratives and how to categorize this hybrid/blend of English and Arabic literature. Attempting to answer these questions, a primary issue in our research paper is to give a more specific categorization to Arab Anglophone women's narratives while taking into consideration that these writings are widely divergent because of the political, cultural and religious non-homogeneity of the Arab world itself. We believe that a common commitment to their *Arab-ness* and cultural identity must be shared among most—if not all—Arab Anglophone women writers whether they are Arab Americans, Arab British or *Anglicized* Arab female intellectuals. In the following sections, we will present our argument that these narratives are more likely to be considered as minor literature. We examine a set of examples of novels and works produced by the most read Arab Anglophone women writers.

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<sup>4</sup> The British academic Geoffrey Nash alone has produced four books devoted to Arab Anglophone literature.

<sup>5</sup> An example is the one-day interdisciplinary workshop on the works of Arab women writers in diaspora held on December 10<sup>th</sup>, 2009 under the title of "Arab Women Writers in Diaspora: Horizons of Dialogue" and which was organized by Dr. Youcef Awad, a currently senior lecturer in Amman University, Jordan.

### Minor Narratives but a Major Discourse

The academic Wail Hassan (2011) has analysed immigrant narratives expressed in the writings of Arab American and Arab British writers. Deleuze and Guattari's theory of minor literature (1986) is also useful as it suggests that Kafka's work—and thus the work of non-natives or immigrants—is a rhizome.<sup>6</sup> The expression of this work does not crystalize into a unifying form; instead it proliferates along different lines of growth. Such work resembles crabgrass, a bewildering multiplicity of stems and roots which can cross at any point to form a variety of possible connections (Deleuze and Guattari 14).

Deleuze and Guattari's theory simply traces the figures of immigrants who stand between the culture of origin and that of the *adoptive* country. Immigrants are equipped with first-hand knowledge of both cultures and they assume the role of mediators, interpreters, cultural translators or a double-sight observer of the two cultural entities. This is very much true to most Arab Anglophone (British or American) women authors—Ahdaf Soueif, Fadia Faqir, Laila Lalami and Leila Aboulela and others as British Arabs; Naomi Shehab Nye, Layla Halabi, Susan Muaddi Darradj and Diana Abou Jaber and others as Arab Americans—though differences exist.

In this regard, and following the same line of Hassan, we assert that Arab Anglophone writings, as immigrant literature, fall primarily into the category of minor literatures, because a minor literature does not come from a minor language, but it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language as it is in the case of English writings produced by Arab immigrants or

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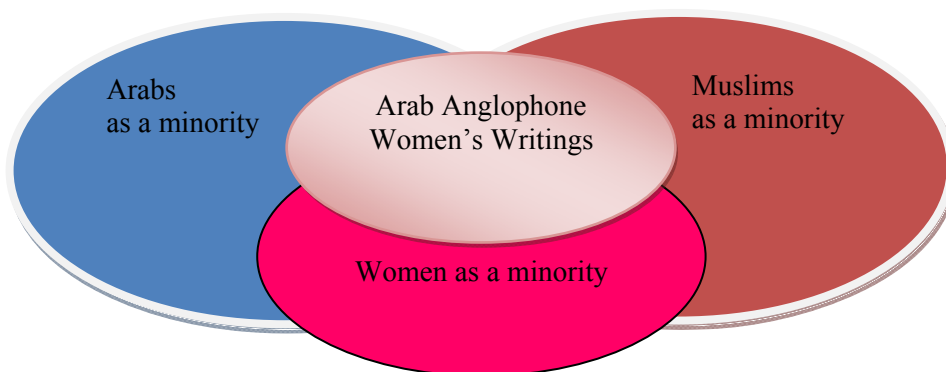
<sup>6</sup> With the metaphor of rhizome and the *proliferation of different lines of growth*, the authors refer to a linguistic, a cultural and an ideological multiplicity shared by most minority narratives. As for the linguistic feature, we have what we call the blending of languages or the code switching by which authors express their linguistic specificity of mastering different mother tongues—English and Arabic for Arab Americans and Arab British writers. In terms of cultural multiplicity, immigrant narratives often exhibit divergent cultures, notably the home-country's culture and the hosting country's culture. Ideologically specific, minor narratives do not side with one ideology, neither the one of the mainstream culture nor that of the back home culture, but they side with what they perceive from the margin, i.e. their own perception of the world which is double-voiced as is the case of American Palestinians who reject both the policy of the US and that of the Palestinian authority, for they see both as a betrayal of the Palestinian Cause.

Americans and/or British citizens of Arabic descent that share the characteristics of minority literatures. Such literatures, for Deleuze and Guattari, have three main characteristics:

- 1) the deterritorialization of language,
- 2) the connection of the individual to a political immediacy,
- 3) the collective assemblage of enunciation.

Based on this perspective, we argue that Arab Anglophone writings and the writings of women in particular, may be categorized as minor and/or minority literature. Although contemporary Arab women's writings are divergent, as their authors belong to different communities, we believe that the literary texts produced by hybrid and hyphenated Arab Anglophone women authors converge, and the differences work to a common commitment vis-à-vis the nation, the home, culture, religion and, above all, gender.

Attributing the label of minor literature to the writings of Arab Anglophone women emerges from a linguistic and cultural perspective. English, the major language, in the hands of these writers—Faqr, Soueif, Halabi, Kahf, Aboulela, Nye and all Arab and/or Muslim Anglophone women authors—has been de-territorialized and metamorphosed to meet the cultural specificity of Arab women as writers who traverse worlds, cultures and languages. The following chart displays a three-fold minority aspect that characterizes Arab Anglophone women's writings:



The chart above displays how Arab Anglophone women's writings are located at the meeting point of three minorities: Arabs, Muslims (taking into consideration that Arabs are Muslims and non-Muslims) and women. Thus, our focus is on the fact that this trend is a three-dimensional minor literature and more concrete examples are going to be given in the following sections.

### **The Specificity(ies) of Arab Anglophone Women's Writings**

As suggested by Geoffrey Nash (2007) in his analytical book devoted to Anglophone Arab literature, *The Anglo-Arab Encounter: Fiction and Autobiography by Arab Writers in English*, contemporary Anglophone Arab writers use English rather than Arabic as the language for their fiction for personal preference, to avoid cultural restrictions and censorship, and to optimize exposure. Some Anglo-Arab writers were embedded within an English-speaking environment either in their country of origin or in Britain/the United States of America, and this made English virtually a native language, so it is natural that they would choose to write in English. Others, especially those for whom Arabic is their first language but who acquired English through the medium of education at a relatively late stage, may make a considered choice of English, aware that there will be both losses and gains, acceptance and rejection. Given the various reasons behind Anglophone Arab writers' choice of English for their literary expression, we suppose that the literary discourse of each group of these writers is different.

Though "multicoloured" and distinct, in terms of themes and literary discourse, works by this group of writers contribute to the emergence of an independent literature that is neither Arabic nor English, but is linguistically and culturally hybrid, discursively multidimensional and literarily heterogeneous. The best example are novels like Aboulela's *The Translator* (1999) where one grasps a meeting of different cultures—the Sudanese and the Scottish—different linguistic repertoires as in "Among the cacti, Rae had queried 'Tariq?', stressing the q. She answered 'yes, it's written with a qaf but we pronounce the qaf as a g back home' (6); in this quote, we perceive a cultural exploration of the *Other* embedded in a linguistic query: Sammar, the Sudanese immigrant who works as a translator, translates a culture and a language to Rae, the Scottish Western professor of Middle Eastern and Postcolonial studies, who wants to explore Sammar's linguistic otherness and hybridity. *The Translator* represents Rae and Sammar as products of cross-cultural encounters as described by Duncan McLean. *The Translator* is a subtle investigation into the meaning of exile and home, doubt and faith, loss and love. The story it tells is sometimes sad, often troubled and troubling, but moves towards a conclusion that's unforced, affirmative and finally very moving.

Aboulela's writing is always beautifully observed, her voice one of restrained lyricism: she is a writer of rare and original talent.<sup>7</sup>

The other issue that is specific to this trend is the audience. In fact, by excluding the relatively small bilingual readership who is able to read in English and Arabic, this group of writers must assume an audience predominantly Anglo-American or European in their cultural perspective; this may lead to more thematic variation. Choosing to address such a readership necessitates what we may describe as a cultural translation that brings about problems inherent in trying to present an alien culture to the globally dominant one, i.e. the Arabic culture to the Western one.

In this connection, literary texts produced by women of *Arabic* decent in foreign languages, notably English and French, have recently become significant for scholars and academics. These scholars noticed an important new hybrid literary phenomenon in the writings of Arab Anglophone women. These texts also present other dimensions in the representation of the *Arab* Woman both in the West and back home in the *Arab* world. Such texts that fuse foreign linguistic background with *Arabic* cultural context also contributed to the reshaping of bridges of cross-cultural and trans-cultural dialogue away from political, geopolitical and socio-economic arenas.

Choosing to write in a foreign language like English is, for Anglophone women writers of Arabic decent, either a deliberate choice that satisfies their literary needs or a natural choice as English is for some writers a mother tongue. As for the former, "many Arab Anglophone writers have also written literature, essays, or academic studies in Arabic, indicating that writing in English is not a repudiation, but a choice offered by the individual writer's background and sensibility, and reinforced by her study of the language and her familiarity with English literature" (F. Ghazoul 302). Ahdaf Soueif, for instance, has produced fiction and non-fiction books and essays both in English and in Arabic. *Aisha* (1983) is her first English collection of short stories. Soueif also writes political commentaries and articles in the Arabic newspaper *Alahram*.

Ahdaf Soueif's novels and short stories have carved out an important space on the stage of world literature. Though she grew up in Egypt, Soueif has also lived in Britain, including during part of her childhood, and wrote her doctorate at the University of

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<sup>7</sup> Reference: <http://www.leila-aboulela.com/books/the-translator/reviews/>

Lancaster. As a matter of fact, Soueif's social, educational and political background make her posit her consciousness at the very crossroads of different generations and divergent cultures. Hechmi Trabelsi published "Transcultural Writing: Ahdaf Soueif's *Aisha* as a Case Study" (2003) which considered Soueif's choice of writing in English. Ahdaf Soueif seems to have no personal history of opposition to or rejection of English. She is simply more at ease with English, the language of her professional training, "the first language [she] read in. "As a woman of two worlds, she is very much "the product of a wrenched history: an Egyptian living in England and writing about Egypt in English," yet she is aware of her paradoxical situation, "conscious of the depth of Arabic, where a word can have certain nuances of which [she] is not aware" (Wassef). She does see the specific danger of being at present the only Egyptian woman writing in English, a foreign language. Worse still, as her detractors have often argued, she wrote (in English) about sex: her first novel, *In the Eye of the Sun*, was originally banned in the Arab world for its portrayal of sexuality. But there is no false apology for not writing in Arabic; as she stated in a 1999 interview, "It is very difficult to explain that this was not a choice, that you work with the tools that are best for you . . . I don't know why, but the fact is that I write better in English than I do in Arabic" (Brooks).

In Soueif's novels and short stories—as in *The Map of Love* and *Sandpiper*—we do notice a certain *in-betweenness*, namely a borderland that separates and gathers at the same time two worlds, two cultures, two languages and above all two consciousnesses; all are different or opposing to one another, yet this very place is where a new *mestiza*, to use Gloria Anzaldúa's word, and Soueif, as such, has transformed into a *nepantela* that in-between state, a third space in which people live. In fact, Anzaldúa's conceptualization of borderlands and in-between spaces is very much found in Soueif's writings.

The Mexican American scholar and feminist, Gloria Anzaldúa, has brought to the area of cultural studies a new conception of how people of two cultures, culturally hybrid after Bhabha, perceive their geographical and psychological space. Anzaldúa was working on a variety of interlinked theories, including a "geography of selves" Anzaldúa states "I am a wind-swayed bridge, a crossroads inhabited by whirlwinds. Gloria, the facilitator, Gloria the mediator, straddling the walls between abysses" (Anzaldúa 4). Likewise, A. Soueif is a cultural mediator between



two worlds: Britain and Egypt, the ex-colonizer and the ex-colonized, the West and the East. In *The Map of Love*, for instance, the main character Amal El-ghamrawi, represents a borderland woman who brings closer the borders of generations, geographies and cultures. For Anzaldua, living between cultures results in 'seeing' double, first from the perspective of one culture, then from the perspective of another. Seeing from two or more perspectives simultaneously renders those cultures transparent. Removed from that culture's centre, one glimpses the sea in which she or he has been immersed but to which they were oblivious, no longer seeing the world the way they were acculturated to see it.

Yousuf Awad, from Jordan, has submitted a whole PhD thesis, entitled *Cartographies of Identities: Resistance, Diaspora, and Trans-cultural Dialogue in the Works of Arab British and Arab American Women Writers* (2011), in which he aimed at exploring the controversy that stems out of the differences existing between Arab British and Arab American women writers. He argues that there is a tendency among Arab British women novelists to foreground and advocate trans-cultural dialogue and cross-ethnic identification strategies in a more pronounced approach than their Arab American counterparts who tend, in turn, to employ literary strategies to resist stereotypes and misconceptions about Arab communities in American popular culture. He also argues that these differences result from the diverse racialized Arab immigration and settlement patterns on both sides of the Atlantic (Awad 6).

Amal Talaat Abdelrazek has published a significant book entitled *Contemporary Arab American Women Writers: Hyphenated Identities and Border Crossings*. This book explores what a hyphenated identity of an Arab American woman is. This work adds an important clarification vis-à-vis the significance of the concept "hyphenated identity" used to refer to Arab American writers and "hybrid identity" to refer rather to Arab British writers within the context of our research. We deduce that a conceptual distinction must be given to different groups belonging to the major trend of Anglophone Arab writers: *hyphenated* to Arab American writers, and *hybrid* to Arab British writers. This distinction is highlighted in the way each group would represent their identity through writings differently and/or similarly, and then it brings a crucial dimension for the categorization of Anglophone Arab women's narratives belonging to these two

subgroups. It is argued that the different identities strongly influence mainly the thematics of the writings of Anglophone Arab women writers, their conception of their “home” / “home-country,” and the Diasporic experience.

The precarious—yet different—positions Arabs occupy in ethnic and racial discourses in Britain and the US influence Arab Anglophone women writers living in Britain and in the US. They perceive and re-identify their *home* and *home-country* differently. They also see their *identity* differently and distinctively. The vision of home specific to these diasporic writers is rooted in the specificity of their hybrid and/or hyphenated identity. As women, as fiction writers and as Arabs, Ahdaf Soueif, Fadia Faqir, Leila Aboulela, Diana Abu Jaber, Naomi Shehab Nye, and others, found a space in their narratives to explore their own depiction of *home*. Either they re-shape the *home* they left behind as grown-up citizens with a critical insight (as in the case of most British Arab female writers) or, if born in the West, they evoke *home*, often with nostalgia, at a later stage of their lives (as in the case of Arab female writers).

Through the various works of literature—whether poetry, novels, short stories and even drama—produced by Arab Anglophone women, we read diverse perceptions of *home* as being identified differently by Arab women writers who write in English. Because the word “home” immediately recalls the idea of the private sphere of patriarchal hierarchy, gendered self-identity, shelter and comfort, the perception of home in the writings of Arab Anglophone women writers relies on their conceptualization of their *home*—homeland, home-country or the nation and the place they are supposed to (originally) belong to—and is twofold as it moves along two main axes:

- The axis of the home they have willingly or unwillingly been displaced from, and then seek to change and see differently;
- And the axis of the home to which they are supposed to originally belong to, and then imaginarily represent with nostalgia.

In this respect, we need to stress that the heterogeneity of the literature produced by Arab women writers in Diaspora arises from the different politics of location specific to two distinct ethnic communities—Arab British and Arab American—as Arab immigration and settlement patterns in Britain and the US are quite historically divergent. As a matter of fact, the literature produced by Arab British writers must be of a different cultural expression than that produced by contemporary Arab American

writers. In the words of Layla Almaleh, Arab British literature is mostly female, feminist, diasporic in awareness, and political in character (Almaleh 13), while Steven Salaita (2007) argues, discussing Arab American literature, that Anglophone Arabs are no less Arabs than anybody else—they merely carry different cultural values as a result of their different social circumstances.

To focus on Arab British women writers, we intend thereby to deal with particular narratives produced by Arab authors who live in Britain (or between Britain and the Arab world) or who are of a mixed Arab and British marriage. Whereas, by focusing on Arab American women authors, we deal with American-born citizens who are of Arab origin. The two groups of writers represent two different minority groups, but with a convergent *home*—the Middle East—and common cultural identity, be it that of Arab origins.

Behind this classification lies an assertion that Anglophone Arab women writers hold a specific view of their *home*, the adoptive culture, their cultural identity and how to bring closer the two cultures; yet this view depends on their politics of location. For instance, in Faqir's *My Name is Salma*, the story is set between the Middle East and Britain. It investigates immigration to a Western country—Britain—not only as a new theme in terms of the central character Salma who is an unskilled Bedouin woman, but also in terms of raising questions about the future of Arabs who live in Britain. Salma is cut off from her country of origin and arrives in Britain for a permanent stay; as such, the novel portrays conflicts of forced dislocation, integration, assimilation, racism and the settlement experience. Salma is constantly dislocated to a new place, that is, a new home, but now it is for a permanent stay in England, a completely different country that seems to be different in culture and religion.

It is in Exeter, in a new home (-land), that Salma goes through a process of forming a new identity, with a new name 'Sally Asher' and a new language with which she fuses Arabic, while she is still haunted by past experiences echoing from Hima, her home-village. Undertaking a brutal process of acculturation,<sup>8</sup> Salma's

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<sup>8</sup> Acculturation is a process in which members of one cultural group adopt the beliefs and behaviors of another group; it also refers to assimilation, and assimilation of one cultural group into another may be evidenced by changes in language preference, adoption of common attitudes and values, membership in common social groups and institutions, and loss of separate political or ethnic identification.

identity is changeable to the point of fragmentation. "A few years ago, I had tasted my first fish and chips, but my mountainous Arab stomach could not digest the fat . . . Salma resisted, but Sally must adapt" (Faqr 9) These lines, quoted from the first chapter of the novel, sum up a long process of de-territorialization, dislocation, acculturation and assimilation that the Bedouin Arab woman victim Salma goes through.

On the other side of the Atlantic, we see Arab American women writers tending to employ literary strategies to subvert stereotypes commonly associated with Arabs in the US. They also tend to look closely at the Arab community from within in order to explore some of the problems that Arab Americans encounter. The re-representation of Arab communities as an important minority in American society is central to the works produced by Arab American authors.

For instance, The Arab American novelist Diana Abu Jaber has dealt with conflicting messages about her Arab identity. Abu Jaber writes about Arab American life, and about characters who are from Iraq and Jordan as is the case with *Crescent* (2003) that is set in Los Angeles and features two major characters with Iraqi roots. The major characters in *Crescent* include Hanif Al Eyad. He's an erudite Iraqi professor in Los Angeles, educated at Georgetown, who has religiously lapsed but still considers himself a devout Muslim and is endowed with good looks and sex appeal. Al Eyad was forced to flee from Saddam Hussein's reign, but his life on the run is only a small backdrop to the first half of the story as his dislocation and malaise will continue in the Diaspora whilst being de-territorialized. However, Nadia's restaurant is the place where a lot of minorities and ethnic groups gather to re-territorialize their lost cultural traits, particularly through food, and it is there that Hanif may be re-territorialized and re-integrated too.

*Crescent* (2003) engages with a problem that faces Arab American communities, namely, stereotyping. *Crescent* explores the life of the intellectual in Diaspora. Among other themes, it attempts to give an insight into the daily issues that an exile encounters. Abu Jaber throws light on the problems of displacement, exile and Diaspora in the present global scene. Lorraine Mercer and Linda Strom, for instance, argue that 'food functions as a complex language for communicating love, memory

and exile' in *Crescent*.<sup>9</sup> The two protagonists of the novel, the Iraqi American Sirine and the Iraqi exiled lecturer Hanif represent two different experiences of displacement: cultural exile vs. political exile.

### **Arab Muslim English Writings: a Minor Trend Within Minor Arab Anglophone Narratives**

Indeed, Anglophone Arab literature, mainly the one produced by women, is a promising field of literary, cultural and discursive research, not only because it is a minority literature but also because it represents an important bridge of communication between the West and the Arab/Muslim world in an era during which tension is growing between the two sides. Due to their cultural blending and linguistic tapestry, these writings offer Western readers an authentic portrayal of the Arab world, and Arab Muslim woman, away from a false representation transmitted to them through manipulated media channels. The Arab American Mohja Kahf has produced novels and poetry that exhibits to her American compatriots her Muslim identity. *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* is beautifully written and features an exuberant cast of characters. It charts the spiritual and social landscape of Muslims in middle America, from five daily prayers to the Indy 500 car race.

The novel is challenging to both the mainstream American community and the Arab American Muslim community. The cover depicts a beautiful Muslim American girl wearing a scarf but also wearing jeans. The novel re-counts events of Khadra Shamy's life in America. The protagonist is the daughter of Syrian immigrants to Indianapolis, whose parents become heavily involved with the Da'wah Centre. The first half of the book is about Khadra growing up in America—in the first few years of elementary school, of dealing with issues like “pig in candy corn,” wearing hijab for the first time and dealing with the abuse of racist neighbours. The novel not only deals with issues that disturb the mainstream American major community like racism and hijab, but it also and

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<sup>9</sup> Lorraine Mercer and Linda Strom, 'Counter Narratives: Cooking Up Stories of Love and Loss in Naomi Shihab Nye's Poetry and Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent*', *MELUS*, 32 (2007), 33-46 (p. 33).

particularly exhibits those issues that bother mainly conservative Arabs and/or Muslims like abortion, art and music.

The other Muslim writer who is widely recognized and accepted by Western readers is Leila Aboulela whose fiction depicts the experience of practicing Muslims in Britain, particularly in the cosmopolitan city of London. This depiction is essentially from an Islamic worldview that is shaped by the immigrant and minority status of British Muslims. Because the fiction inspired by Islam is unusual and often rejected by Westerners and in the English tradition that has been mystical, secular or Christian, Aboulela's works have challenged not only the English literary tradition that has been so many times Islamophobic,<sup>10</sup> but also Modern Arabic literature that has been for many decades predominantly secular.<sup>11</sup> In fact, distinctively minor within a minor literature, Aboulela's Muslim fiction represents a minor tradition in relation to Arabic, American and British literatures as it develops new dimensions to global Muslim discourse that is a major religious discourse. In *Minaret* (2005), the protagonist Najwa joins a wider Muslim community in the central mosque to make an end to her displacement and disintegration into rich Arab immigrant families and/or Christian British mainstream culture. In relation to the Scottish identity—as evidenced in Aboulela's essay "Barbie in the Mosque" (180) or in *The Translator* (1999), we see that her narratives attempt to answer distinct and crucial questions regarding the Muslim identity in the West and the Scottish identity in Britain through a portrayal of a complex process of de-territorialization and dislocation experienced by most of her characters, particularly Najwa in *Minaret* who finds a sense of re-territorialization when she wears the scarf, and finds refuge in the purity of her faith.

However, Aboulela's veiled character is invisible to most eyes, especially to the rich families whose houses she cleans. Exiled to London after years of high class life back home in Sudan, Najwa is forced to move into a long process of dislocation and invisibility

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<sup>10</sup> *Those In Peril* (2011) by the British novelist Wilbur Smith is such an example. It is a simplistic story about a woman who is the owner of an oil company. The hero is a security man and the first victim is the heroine's daughter who is kidnapped and held for ransom, tortured and raped. And all this is done by "Muslim" pirates as part of an obscure vendetta against the hero and heroine.

<sup>11</sup> It is the case of most prominent Arab writers: Naguib Mahfouz, Nizar Qabani, Mahmoud Darwish, Houda Barakat, Ahlam Mostaghanemi and others.

even when she feels the spiritual peace and stability that she finds only in Regent Park's mosque with her Muslim friends of different races. In this respect, we consider that *Minaret* is a story of how devout Muslim women can find another chance at life even when being rejected, exiled, displaced or de-territorialized. This can be seen as another type of the re-territorialization process described by Deleuze and Guattari. Aboulela explained her commitment to Muslim narratives in an interview. She indicated that she is interested in writing about the state of mind and feelings of a Muslim who has faith. (Aboulela, *Minaret*).

### **Conclusion(s)**

English literary works produced by contemporary Arab women writers surpass the post-coloniality attributed to them by most critics. The multiplicity within these works originates in the specificity of their writers. They "are no less Arabs than anybody else—they merely carry different cultural values as a result of their different social circumstances" (S. Salaita 35). The particularity of these women is not only that they write in a universal language—English, and that most of them are women of two worlds—the mother country and the Diaspora, but also that they may find more liberty in dealing with controversial issues and taboo themes when writing in English. Consequently, their English writings give a vivid and authentic representation of the Arab world with its cultural, religious and political specificity, and they are likely to succeed in constructing cross-cultural bridges between the West and the Arab world.

In fact, what is special to these works is the fact that they are written by women who, in different ways, feel displaced but are located at the very contact zone of many cultures. It is argued that these characteristics bring an important element of distinctiveness and individuality to English Arab women's writings. Through their writings, Arab Anglophone writers, hyphenated or hybrid, defy any categorization and speak articulately to the diversity of Arab women wherever they are—to their ideas, desires, emotions and strategies for survival.

In this regard, it should be mentioned that Anglophone Arab women's narratives grew out of a different context than that of their Francophone compatriots. This difference originates in the

divergent colonial policy practiced by France and Britain. As for France, it exercised a policy of cultural assimilation and simply tried to “francophy” its territories, expending great effort to repress the cultural specificity of dominated peoples. Britain, due to a racist assumption denying that Arabs and other colonized peoples could ever be part of the British *cultural fabric*, eschewed such assimilation. As a matter of fact, Arab women’s francophone literature is generally produced by women writers who only write in French, as they are familiar only with colloquial Arabic, not standard classical Arabic. On the other hand, Arab women’s Anglophone literature is produced by women writers who are generally well-acquainted with standard Arabic, and they have other reasons for writing in English, like having grown up in areas or having studies in institutions dominated by English, or simply having migrated to English-speaking countries such as the Egyptian Ahdaf Soueif, the Palestinian Soraya Antonius, the Sudanese Leila Abulela or the Jordanian Fadia Faqir.

We believe that the self-identification of Arab British and/or Arab American writers is important. Their gender, their ability to manipulate different cultural traits and amalgamate them into one, and, for some, bilingualism—have given rise to specific literary writings with special thematics, special characters, special literary techniques, and a special doubled perception of contemporary life. These writers are especially sensitive to the de-territorialization / re-territorialization internalized by immigrants who feel displaced and dislocated in the Diaspora. Therefore, it is high time literary critics thought of Arab Anglophone women’s narratives as a new minor literature that is articulated in a major language—English—and as an international discourse particular to Arab Anglophone women writers in order to set out new literary elements that can add more detail to Sabry Hafez’s *feminist literary typology*,<sup>12</sup> namely the Arab Anglophone women’s writings’ discursive and genre typology.

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<sup>12</sup> In an article entitled “Women’s Narrative in Modern Arabic Literature” published on NITTLE Arab World Project website, Sabry Hafez, the author of *The Genesis of Arabic Narrative Discourse*, offered a significant gender-based typology of Arab women’s literary writings. This typology of the development of feminist awareness in the Arab world posits a homological relationship between changes in class background of the writers and their perception of national identity. Ref. [http://acc.teachmideast.org/texts.php?module\\_id=7&reading\\_id=37](http://acc.teachmideast.org/texts.php?module_id=7&reading_id=37)



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