WOMEN, GENDER, AND WOMEN’S FICTION: THE UNITED STATES

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Micropedia (Abstract): Arab and Arab American women writers today are embedded in a political, social, and ethical complex that, whether explicitly or not, affects their writing. Using the metaphor of invisibility to describe the state of their existence and that of their work, their efforts are directed toward writing themselves and their experiences into visibility. Uniquely positioned as transnational subjects, their subjectivities are forged across multiple, often global vectors of identification, providing them with multiple consciousness. Their writing thus not only to attests to their presence, but also critiques and questions what exactly it means to be Arab, American, and Arab American. The works and experiences of Laila Lalami, Samia Serageldin, Suheir Hammad, Dima Hilal, Nathalie Handal, Mohja Kahf, Diana Abu-Jaber, and Susan Abulhawa can serve as examples of how Arab American women explore the multiplicity of subjectivity as they are uniquely formed in the U.S. landscape.

Subject Words: Arab American writers; women; Islamic feminism; multiple critique; women of color; literature; political activism; transnational literature
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INTRODUCTION

Arab American women writers today are embedded in a political, social, and ethical complex that, whether explicitly or not, affects their writing. Using the metaphor of invisibility to describe the state of their existence and work, their efforts are directed toward writing themselves and their experiences into visibility. Visibility, though, is complex because it is not mere representation. This complexity emerges in the way Arab American women writers resist identity politics. Uniquely positioned as transnational subjects, their subjectivities are forged across multiple, often global vectors of identification, providing them with what Miriam Cooke (2001) calls multiple consciousness. Their writing thus not only attests to their presence, but also critiques and questions what exactly it means to be Arab, American, and Arab American. While Arab American women’s work emerges daily, with anthologies, publishers’ series, organizations, journals, magazines, conferences, and online fora encouraging such writing, this entry will address the works and experiences of Laila Lalami, Samia Serageldin, Suheir Hammad, Dima Hilal, Nathalie Handal, Mohja Kahf, Diana Abu-Jaber, and Susan Abulhawa as examples of how Arab American women explore the multiplicity of subjectivity as it is formed in the US landscape. Furthermore, this entry will discuss this multiplicity in the inextricable themes of social justice, religion, race, food, the figure of the father, and the importance of storytelling.

WRITING AGAINST ORIENTALIST STEREOTYPES: WRITING IN A STATE OF INVISIBILITY

Because of current global political, social, and economic conditions, Arabs and Muslims have become substitutional equivalent in the American vernacular, synonyms for all that is undesirable, with non-specificity eerily expanding their cultural threat (Bayoumi 2016, 34). The actions of Arabs and/or
Muslims thus become representative of a culture and religious practice, rendering individual voices and experiences invisible. As a result, Arab/Muslim American (and even Arab/Muslim European) writing is always in some way writing against images and stereotypes. Following Edward Said’s groundbreaking work on orientalism, Wail Hassan (2011, 4) argues that Arab American and British writers “have all had to contend with Orientalist stereotypes and prejudices that surface in step with changes in domestic climate and political developments abroad.” As a result, “the predominant stance of those writers has been that of a cultural translator who claims a privileged position to interpret the Arab world to American or British readers” (Hassan 2011, xii). Not only writers, but critics too assume the role of cultural translator and corrector of stereotypes. For example, even though he is not Arab American, Evelyn Shakir describes a female character in one of Paul Nassar’s personal memoirs, “East Utica”, in *Wind of the land* (1979) as being “in some ways the best corrective to Western stereotypes of Arab women” (1991–92, 15).

Problems arise, though, when writers and critics try to undo these homogenizing stereotypes as they risk engaging in the same essentialist logic that renders them invisible. Michelle Hartman, for instance, highlights this problem by discussing prefaces to anthologies on Arab American literature. When arguing for the need for more anthologies on Arab American writing precisely to debunk stereotypes against Arabs, Muslims, and women, some anthologists end up reproducing other essentialisms. Some of those include the argument that poetry is “in the Arab blood,” as *Grape leaves. A century of Arab American poetry* does (Hartman 2008, 201); others claim “there is an Arab spirit that itself can be defined,” as is the case in *Post Gibran. Anthology of new Arab American writing* (Hartman 2008, 201).

The problem of invisibility is worse for women writers. Pointing to the gendered nature of community and culture, cooke (2001, 126), writes that women “are easily turned by outsiders into images that then become emblems of their culture, for within the culture itself women serve that same function.” Added to that, when politicians and the global media depict Arab and/or Muslim women as veiled,
oppressed victims, that image becomes emblematic of what it means to be an Arab or Muslim, and is “filtered through Orientalist lenses—mysterious, alluring, secluded” (cooke 2001, 126).

Some scholars of Arab American literature warn against treating the writing of men and women separately, which not only silences the voices of those who identify with genders other than male and female, but also engages in the very same discourse of dichotomous essentialisms and perpetuates orientalist stereotypes that consider “Muslim, Arab, and Arab-American women to be oppressed and powerless, and Muslim, Arab, and Arab-American men to be agents of oppression and terror” (Fadda-Conrey 2014, 10). Nonetheless, for Arab and/or Muslim American women, writing against invisibility, writing as a corrective to stereotypes, and writing as cultural translators is much more fraught than it is for men “precisely because certain political entities and cultural outlets insist that Muslim women are severely and uniquely oppressed even in the ‘torpid Muslim mainstream’ and need to be saved” (Shehabuddin 2011, 103).

The responsibility of writing against invisibility risks falling into or being expected to play the role of the native informant—one who speaks on authority simply because one is born into a certain group. For example, as a native informant, a Muslim woman has the authority to speak about all Muslim women simply because she is, by accident of birth, a Muslim woman; or an Arab woman can speak with authority about the oppressive nature of Arab men, regardless of her education, exposure, or expertise, simply because by accident of birth, she was born an Arab.

Rather than write toward visibility, the native informant exacerbates invisibility because it plays into the emblematic framework of representation, making women themselves tropes rather than complex human beings (Naous 2016, 17). If one trope is that of the Muslim woman that needs saving, another is that which Shehabuddin (2011) describes as the exceptional “moderate Muslim.” Moderate Muslims are “women who are Muslim, ex-Muslim, or non-Muslim (but from the Muslim world)” (Shehabuddin 2011, 103). Now liberated from the “shackles” and “cages” of Islam, they freely live in the United States or in
some other “western” nation and are on a campaign to save other female victims of Islam from its chains. Shehabuddin describes writers such as Ayaan Hirsi Ali—author of *Infidel* (2008) and *Heretic. Why Islam needs a reformation now* (2016)—and Irshad Manji—author of *The trouble with Islam today. A Muslim’s call for reform in her faith* (2005)—as moderate Muslims. The underlying assumption of their liberation is that “Islam must follow a path similar to Western Christianity, that modernity and freedom must be understood the same way for and by everyone everywhere” (Shehabuddin 2011, 103). As Leila Ahmed puts it, the salvation of Muslim women entails “not arguing with and working to change our traditions but giving up our cultures, religions, and traditions and adopting theirs” (Ahmed, quoted in cooke 2001, 81).

The trope of the moderate Muslim is “almost a Western invention” (Shehabuddin 2011, 103) because it confirms ideas that there is a homogeneous, monolithic “east” that only a “modern” and “Christian west” can save, echoing discourse used by missionaries and colonial administrators to further their colonizing missions (Abu-Lughod 2013, 33). The writings and appearances of moderate Muslims have been used to further more contemporary “rescue missions in the Muslim world” (Shehabuddin 2011, 103), including the gender tactics used to justify the 2001 war in Afghanistan and the 2003 war in Iraq. The experiences of these women are thus pushed into the mainstream, and so these writers—who have, indeed, “had exciting, often tragic and disturbing, experiences, and their memoirs make for good reading”—end up being taken for the norm. “What is forgotten is that they are fascinating precisely because they are unusual, dramatic experiences” (Shehabuddin 2011, 133). In other words, the stories that are the exception are taken to be the rule of “Arab” and “Muslim” women’s realities. As cooke (2001, 126, emphasis added) puts it, “No matter how many chaste, modest American women an Asian Muslim might meet, no matter how many assertive, independent unveiled Asian Muslim women an American may meet, the basic image may not change as these individuals are seen as exceptions to a rule that they thereby serve to reinforce.” As Arab American women, where “Arab” is usually conflated with “Muslim,” no matter how many times the stereotype or image is undone, the undoing is always considered the exception, the anomaly that as a result inadvertently perpetuates the image that the “norm”
is either the veiled, oppressed victim or the mysterious, alluring, oriental odalisque. At the same time, as Arab American women, they are perceived as being more sexually “loose” than their female counterparts who grow up in the “old country.”

Laila Lalami—author of *Hope and other dangerous pursuits* (2005), *Secret son* (2009), and *The Moor’s account* (2014)—asserts that Arabs and Muslims write in a state of invisibility precisely because people hear so much about Islam. “Islam and the West, Islam and democracy, Islam and human rights” (Lalami 2011, 145)—terms set up as though they are irreconcilable antonyms in signification. When only extremist, oversimplified forms of Islam are given visibility and framed in narratives that are polarizing, orientalist, and divisive, it is not surprising that Arab Americans describe themselves as invisible (Saliba 1999). “[W]hile Islam may be omnipresent in Europe,” Lalami continues, “Muslims in Europe [and other ‘western’ countries] are, in my view, invisible” (Lalami 2011, 145).

Lalami, quoting British novelist Martin Amis, states that “all writing is a campaign against cliché, but this campaign is especially difficult for Arab American women writers because they make up part of the group that is “the ultimate Other of our age” (Lalami 2011, 147–48), “one of the few ethnic groups it is still ‘safe to hate’” (Majaj 1999, 321). Because of Islam’s ubiquity, Samia Serageldin—author of *The Cairo House* (2000) and *The Naqib’s daughter* (2008)—writes that no matter how personal or private an event or a writer’s work may be, one must always be aware of its “far-reaching consequences” (Serageldin 2004, 136). In spite of personal politics and degrees of commitment to one’s religious heritage, Arab and/or Muslim Americans are, “for better or for worse, to bear the burden of shaping the collective image of what is erroneously perceived as a single community but is in fact a homogenizing label applied to people of highly diverse sensibilities and backgrounds” (Serageldin 2004, 136).

Transformed into tropes, women are expected to serve as native informants or cultural translators. In a short article, “Writing Muslims,” Lalami is asked to reflect on the place of Islam in her writing (2011, 146). While it would be ridiculous to ask a secular white man about Christianity’s role in his writing,
Arab women are constantly asked to do this in complete seriousness. She therefore begins her essay by describing an experience she has at a literary festival in New York City. There, she meets a French writer who is both happy and surprised to find that she is originally Moroccan. Quickly, the conversation turns from literature to Moroccan immigrants in France, which prompts him to tell her, “If they were all like you, there wouldn’t be a problem” (Lalami 2011, 144). Lalami is surprised as much by what he says as by the fact that he seems to be paying her a compliment, implying that she is a more desirable immigrant because she is an inconspicuous Muslim, with no beard, veil, or “‘noise and smell,’ to use Jacques Chirac’s delicate wording,” to give her away (Lalami 2011, 145). Without asking her actual views on immigration, which Lalami is sure would not be to his liking, the French writer quickly turns her inconspicuousness into an exception. Lalami has a similar experience in Scottsdale, Arizona. During one of her book readings, one audience member asks her, “Why aren’t we hearing more from people like you?” (Lalami 2015).

Given this complex backdrop, Arab American women writers are positioned in a way that makes their choices, actions, and writings laden with representative responsibility. What, then, does a writer do if she wants to tell the story of a young girl from Egypt forced by her father to marry a Frenchman, only later to be disowned by that very same father because the marriage is considered collaborationist (when a local is considered a traitor for working with a foreign or invading party), which Serageldin does in The Naqib’s daughter? How does she tell that story without perpetuating the stereotype of the oppressive Muslim man? For Serageldin (2004, 137), the undoing of the stereotype can only happen through what she calls honest, unfettered writing, writing that can “transcend the limitations of ‘exceptionalism’ and allow the mainstream reader to penetrate the cultural opaqueness of the ‘other’.” As such, the only story one can tell is one that relates the emotional complexity of a character in a plausible, complex reality—the very thing that makes for any good story (Lalami 2011).

It is under these fraught conditions that Arab American women write, but they write not as an identity group—far from it. The category “Arab American literature” has been characterized as “a way for
this literature to find a niche and an audience and a way for critics to pursue coherent forms of investigation of that literature” (Salaita 2011, 7). Such characterization could be used to describe the writing of Arab American women writers: spaces for them to investigate coherent forms of being across global and multiple vectors of identification, the burdens of representative writing, and the responsibility and power of unfettered, complex writing.

**TRANSNATIONALITY, MULTIPLE CONSCIOUSNESS, MULTIPLE CRITIQUE**

Women writers who are Arab American have responsibly circumvented writing as the “exception” or the “norm” by doing what cooke (2001) describes as multiple critique. This stems from their inescapably transnational subjectivities, informed by multiple consciousness, which means their lives and experiences are affected by domestic and political developments abroad, they have emotional and kinship ties locally and in the “old country,” and they have grown up with more than one language. For Serageldin (2003, 193), “writers of Arab heritage, whether foreign-born or American-born, who write in English […] share the sensibilities of transnational identity.” For her, what is most interesting about their writing is:

> the insider/outsider perspective, a perspective that straddles more than one culture and appeals to a multiple audience. Both insight and bifocal vision accompany the personality of writers who mediate alternative realities of past and present, remembered worlds and American actualities. (2003, 193)

According to Carol Fadda-Conrey, transnationality is Arab American literature’s unifying characteristic. For her, these transnational modes of belonging allow Arab American writers to transform exclusionary understandings of all kinds of belonging—national, religious, and even racial, to name only a few. She argues that Arab American texts “portray anti-assimilationist and transnational modes of Arab-American belonging that ultimately transform dominant and exclusionary U.S. understandings of national
membership and citizenship” (Fadda-Conrey 2014, 3); similarly, this multiple consciousness allows Arab American women writers to critique and transform dominant and exclusionary understandings of all forms of group membership with which they identify or are expected to identify. “As symbols and upholders of their cultures, Arab-American women have been expected to be unquestionably loyal. Loyalty meant ‘grin and bear it’” (cooke 2001, 145). Writing with multiple consciousness, though, they engage in multiple critique: of U.S. society, law, and understandings of citizenship as well as those of Arab and religious communities, “without incurring the accusation of cultural betrayal” (cooke 2001, 145).

THE QUESTION OF RACE: WHITE OR PERSON OF COLOR?

Multiple critique occurs around issues of race, where, in the United States in particular, “percentages of color are carefully computed so as to calculate degrees of benefit” (cooke 2001, 140). U.S. federal guidelines expect Arab Americans to check off “white”, and most do, making Arab Americans legally “white” on government documents and in the U.S. census; nevertheless, their status as “white” has always been precarious.

Early in the twentieth century, the majority of immigrants to the United States identified as Syrian, but because they held Turkish passports (Syria still being part of the Ottoman Empire), their naturalization was often a problem because US law stipulated that only free white persons or persons of African descent could be naturalized (Gualtieri 2001, Samhan 1999). Because of their transnationality, this necessity to fit into a racial category confounded Arab American immigrants as much as it did white Americans of European heritage because they were unsure “whether being Arabic speakers constituted a cultural or a racial identity, and whether race was a matter of blood or culture” (Hassan 2011, 16). Early Arab Americans understandably fought to be white because their very survival depended on it. The literature of early Arab Americans conveys this (see the thorough analysis of the works of the Mahjar
poets, for instance, in Hassan). At the time, white status afforded Arab Americans the right to vote, own property, and move about freely to conduct business.

Constant changes in immigration laws over the century (Samhan 1999), as well as major global political events—such as the Iranian Revolution in 1979; the Israeli-Palestinian conflicts in 1948, 1967, and 1973; the two Intifadas of 1991 and 2000; the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 during the latter’s fifteen-year civil war; George H. W. Bush’s Gulf War between Iraq and Kuwait in 1991; and, of course, 9/11—made Arab Americans’ legal status as white “honorary,” meaning they “were accepted into the body politic, but under suspicion that they did not quite deserve it” (Gualtieri 2001, 51). And so, as Sarah Gualtieri’s work shows, even though whiteness is not a biological fact, race is a very real social fact. Arab Americans have confronted this reality, often experiencing fatal violence, as shown by the lynchings of Nola Romey in 1929 (Gualtieri 2004) and the bombing of the Arab-American Anti-Discrimination offices that killed Alex Odeh in 1985 (Malek 2009, 103–22).

Arab Americans’ political, racial in-betweenness has prompted many Arab American women to self-identify or portray their characters as “people of color” (Shalal-Esa 2003, 26). While legally “white,” identifying as simultaneously Arab and/or Muslim and/or women of color “relocates Arab-American women in the U.S. context” (cooke 2001, 145). For such women, far from being a declaration of identity, this nomenclature actually rejects identitarian politics, where “one’s own identity or constellation of identities becomes the authorizing position from which to speak and to deauthorize the language of those not similarly placed” (cooke 2001, 113). This shift in subjectivity is a strategic, coalition-building choice that accounts for identity politics and engages its game but refuses to believe in it or lend it authorizing power. It carves out a space for Arab American women to speak in the United States and gives women writers agency and a voice “of political solidarity in order to challenge racial hierarchies” (Hartman 2008, 198).
Heeding Gualtieri’s warning that changing racial status from “white” to something else risks dismissing the violent history that went into Arab Americans’ fight to become white (2001), this horizontal self-positioning is a strategic shift that allows Arab American women to become “part of a new group, people of color, who contest white hegemony in the United States” (cooke 2001, 145). Such a shift in nomenclature “has provided a space for many Arab Americans to assess, and also politicize, their identity and solidarity with others. For many it is a way in which to validate their experience and lived reality, which do not match their legal classification as ‘white’” (Hartman 2008, 198). For Lisa Suheir Majaj, such solidarity amongst people who share a history of marginalization in the United States is necessary to avoid the insularity that obfuscates the principles of justice and equality that underlie Arab American struggles there (1999, 325–26).

In a 2004 anthology of Arab and Arab American women on writing, Barbara Nimri Aziz positions the writing collected in the anthology as akin to the writing of peoples of color. Invoking the metaphor of invisibility, she states that “there are many similarities between Arab and African American experiences in the U.S.” (Darraj 2004, xi), drawing on the work of James Baldwin to argue that one can negotiate his or her experience with that of the “dominant white culture” by writing of one’s own experience (Darraj 2004, xi). While African Americans are the “minority” group on which all other groups in the United States model their own minority status (Hartman 2008, 178), Aziz does not stop there. She says that when Arab American women write, their work could be considered among the tradition of writers that includes not only Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, and Alice Walker, but also other American women who identify as women of color, such as Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan (Darraj 2004, xiv). By invoking these names, Aziz identifies a literary tradition of women of color in which to contextualize, understand, and teach Arab American women’s work.

Indeed, for Arab American poets moving to, being born in, growing up in, or simply studying in the United States, it is in the work of women of color that they are able to find community. Lisa Suheir Majaj, for instance, describes reading the works of Maxine Hong Kingston and Native American poet Joy
Harjo as a turning point in her life (Ludescher 2006, 103). Nathalie Handal writes that the works of “African American authors such as June Jordan, Alice Walker, and Langston Hughes [were] about experiences of marginalization, discrimination, and injustice, issues I related to” (Handal 2004, 40, emphasis added). Dima Hilal describes her experience of coming across June Jordan’s essay “Eyewitness in Lebanon,” published in *The Progressive* magazine in 1996 as resurrecting her suffering from invisibility:

> Her words eloquent, haunting, described the crisis back home. I devoured every word, held rapt by this woman’s courage, by her humanity, and most of all by the power of her witnessing. I cut out the article, folded it in half and saved it—perhaps recognizing it even then as a lifeline that I could cling to in the face of this erasing, this invisibility. (Hilal 2004, 100)

No more so have people of color influenced the writing of Arab American women as they have the work of poet Suheir Hammad. Of these influences, she lists artists and critics of both academic and street culture, such as Edward Said, Howard Zinn, Noam Chomsky, Etheridge Knight, Audre Lorde, June Jordan, Mahmoud Darwish, Jayne Cortez, Amiri Baraka, Gloria Anzaldúa, Toni Morrison, Sandra Cisneros, and even Rakim, Bruce Springsteen, and John Coltrane (Hammad 2004, 81). Why such a diverse list? So that she does not limit herself “to one kind of music, one school of prose, even one language from which to cull the musicality, the rhythm of your work” (Hammad 2004, 81). This diversity of writers has helped her locate a space for herself in the American landscape, and it has given her the language to articulate her own experiences.

Hammad has been particularly affected by Jordan’s poetry because it recognizes that “diverse forms of domination and persecution are linked throughout different parts of the world along multiple vectors of power” (Harb 2014, 72). She commemorates that influence by titling her first cycle of poetry, *Born Palestinian, born Black* (1996), a nod to June Jordan’s poem, “Moving towards home,” which the latter wrote in response to the Sabra and Shatila massacre of 1982. In the poem, Jordan writes:
I was born a Black woman
And now
I am become a Palestinian
Against the relentless laughter of evil
There is less and less living room
And where are my loved ones?

It is time to make our way home (Jordan, 1982)

Jordan builds solidarity internationally by calling for a “living room” that has space enough to accommodate life beyond simplistic systems of normative, identitarian politics. Similarly, in her own work, Hammad addresses suffering beyond that of the Palestinians and other Arabs around the world, referring in her poetry to Haiti, Chechnya, Chiapas, and even East Los Angeles, “distancing [herself] from forms of solidarity based on ethnic or cultural allegiances to configure affiliations based on choice and a sense of responsibility, creating alternative structure/politics of belonging” (Harb 2014, 86).

In her critical comparison of Jordan and Hammad’s work, Sirène Harb shows how this new politics of belonging is couched in “women of color critique” (2014, 73). This critique rejects normative systems that depend on hegemonic and divisive forms of being and difference, such as East/West, Muslim/West, victimer/victimized, and so on. In fact, these systems work to silence the rebellious and prevent “complex associations and subtle distinctions that pave the way for the acknowledgment of specific strengths and weaknesses in different social and political movements” (Harb 2014, 84).

Hammad thus positions herself in an epistemological framework based on the “decentering of normative politics” (Harb 2014, 76). To avoid being pigeonholed as “ethnic” literature, such horizontal intertextualities catalyze “radical change and transformation” (Harb 2014, 93) because they also work to change values of judgment. While Arab Americans and African Americans experience similar forms of
oppression in the United States (Hartman 2006, 146), when Hammad employs the Black vernacular, African mythology, and African American symbols in the form and content of her poetry, she does so not to appropriate the tradition, but to show that culture is a place of shared understanding (Hartman 2006, 148). Powerfully, this artistic move challenges criteria of valuation and devaluation, so her “salvation” is not imitative of “Western Christianity,” or, as quoted above, a modernity and freedom that must be understood on those terms (Shehabuddin 2011, 103). Rather, in doing so, her work celebrates African American poetry and its blackness (Hartman 2006, 160), locating freedom by building coalition with people of color and their art.

Harb’s analysis of Hammad and Jordan shows that they identify with “multiple political identifications” (2014, 82) and that their subjectivity is built along “multiple lines of being” (2014, 83); in short, the very multiplicity that allows them to speak to audiences with similarly multiple subjectivities, complicating “simple notions of what the community and its literary production are and can be” (Hartman 2008, 203).

This strategic repositioning gives women writers agency as well as the multiple consciousness to be critical of their own communities, of the United States and its local and foreign policies, and orientalist perceptions of Arab, Muslim, and American women. While writers build political coalitions to assert the multiplicity of identity, to recognize global forms of oppression and violence, and to argue for social justice for everyone, multiple consciousness also, as mentioned above, allows for critique of the multiple communities and identity groups with which Arab American women writers identify. As a result, when Arab American women write, they may be debunking stereotypes and orientalist images, but they do not present an alternative or correct image of an Arab American woman. Rather than being prescriptive, their writing is critical and exploratory, and in it, the complexity of various and varying lives takes form. Such exploration occurs in the overlapping spaces of religion, race, food, the figure of the father, and the importance of storytelling, and is discussed below in the works of Mohja Kahf, Samia Serageldin, Susan Abulhawa, Diana Abu-Jaber, Suheir Hammad, and Laila Lalami.
MULTIPLE CRITIQUE: ISLAMIC FEMINISM

Part of multiple critique is Islamic feminism, which, like women of color critique, is “a contingent, contextually determined strategic self-positioning” (cooke 2001, 59). As cooke explains it:

It entails the study of the life of the Prophet, of the many strong women around him, and of his founding umma in the seventh century, and also direct engagement with the foundational texts, rather than merely reaction to their interpretations. It involves looking at the context in which the Qur’an was revealed and these texts were written. Finally, it means applying this understanding to the present so as to question the ways in which Islamic knowledge has been produced. (cooke 2001, 62)

Rather than rely on traditional, patriarchal interpretations of the religion, Islamic feminists use the same authoritative, sacred texts—such as the Qur’an and hadith—and the same authoritative methodologies of ijtihād (jurisprudential interpretation)—such as qiyās (analogical reasoning), ijmāʿ (consensus), and ’urf (custom) (Quraishi 2002, 742)—to come up with more egalitarian, feminist, and human-rights based interpretations of Islam, shari’a (legal) ways of living, and fatwas (legal rulings). Although these same methodologies and texts have been used to interpret the religion on masculine terms, when Islamic feminists employ them as Muslims, it legitimates both their jurisprudence and their interpretations. It also allows them to reform their communities from within, without having to give up their religion or betray their personal faith and devotion

As such, Islamic feminism “confirms belonging in a religious community while allowing for activism on behalf of and with other women […] without fear that they will be accused of being Westernized and imitative” (cooke 2001, 60). Like choosing to position oneself as a woman of color, Islamic feminists link “their religious, political, and gender identities so as to claim simultaneous and
sometimes contradictory allegiances even as they resist globalization, local nationalism, Islamization, and the patriarchal system that pervades them all” (cooke 2001, 60).

Mohja Kahf’s *Girl in the tangerine scarf* (2006) is one such feminist text, a bildungsroman about a young Khadra who grows up with her two brothers in rural Indiana. They are raised by conservative Muslim parents who have emigrated from Syria to a hostile and unwelcoming United States. Feeling completely uprooted and alone, they dedicate their lives to the Dawah Center (from *da`wah*, religious summon or invitation), a Muslim community center that is welcoming of anyone so long as they remain faithful to the faith.

When Khadra and her brother Eyad go to Sunday school to study religion, they are taught by Uncle Taher that the first Muslim is not Abu Bakr, as Eyad may have thought, but actually Khadija, the Prophet’s first wife, because she was the first to believe the revelations he was receiving were divine (Kahf 2006, 36). Later in life, Khadra employs her Islamic education to justify having an abortion when she accidentally gets pregnant during a rough period in her marriage. Islamic feminist that she is, she makes use of her Sunday school education at the Dawah Center to assert the Islamic legality of her decision. Referring to the *ijmāʾ* or consensus around abortion in Islamic schools of thought, she insists: “All the schools of thought allow it,” and that “al-Ghazali [one of the most prominent theologians, whose works influence Islamic legal interpretations and their logical justification] says you can [even] do it if you do not care to lose your figure” (Kahf 2006, 225). Nevertheless, given the patriarchal system that pervades society, when she does go through with the abortion, the entire community, including her family, shuns her. The very community that encourages her to pray, to read the sacred texts, and to practice Islam and follow its law, only has “living room” for a masculine interpretation of Islam, and the novel does not shy away from critiquing this injustice.
*Girl* does not stop at revealing the gender prejudices of the Dawah religious community; it also reveals its racial ones. Eyad falls for the perfect Muslim woman, Maha, the daughter of a Sudanese doctor, with:

impeccable character, [who] was active at the mosque, and wore flawless hijab with not a hair showing. And definitely, she was a native speaker of Arabic, with a pure accent, and a fluency aided by the private Arabic tutors her father had hired. She was splendidly qualified to teach their future children the language of the Quran. (Kahf 2006, 139)

Eyad decides to announce to his parents that he would like to marry this perfect Muslim, but when he does, his father blurts out, “But for heaven’s sake, she’s as black as coal” (Kahf 2006, 139). Although this comes as a shock to Eyad and Khadra, whose parents have thus far stressed only the importance of Islam and the practices of being a good Muslim, Eyad obeys his parents, like the good son that he is, and drops the subject. This scene is precisely one of multiple critique: the narrator reveals that religious insularity is also saturated with racial prejudice. While her immigrant parents find community among Muslims because they feel unwelcome in a racist white America, this does not come without its own side effects of racial prejudice. The novel thereby reveals that, just as other small-town Hoosier communities harbor hypocrisy and contradictions of racial, class-based, and gender prejudices, as a small-town Hoosier community itself, so does this Muslim one.

Similarly, Khadra critiques sexism both in her own community as well as transnationally, specifically while on her pilgrimage to Mecca in Saudi Arabia. There, she is seduced by the *adḥān* of the mosque right outside her window, “The mosque is so near—the *adhan* was so beautiful—and it was calling to me, to *me*” (167), and so she goes to the mosque to pray *fajr*. She is consequently arrested by the *māṭawwa*’ (morality police) for leaving her home without her *mahram* (male relative). When she is returned to her parents, her father explains to her, “women are not allowed to pray in the mosque here”
For Khadra, this is “preposterous” because, first, she always prays in the mosque in Indiana. Second, using *qiyās* to establish religious precedent, she refers to a credible hadith proclaiming:

> It doesn’t even make sense. Everyone knows women go to the mosque […] What about Aisha? What about how Omar wished his wife would not go to the mosque for *fajr* but he couldn’t stop her because he knew it was her right? What about the prophet saying “You must never prevent the female servants of God from attending the houses of God?” (Kahf 2006, 168)

When she says all this to the *mātawwa*, he laughs at her, saying to his colleague, “listen to this woman quoting scriptures at *usf*!” (Kahf 2006, 168). As a Muslim woman in Mecca, her female voice is dismissed and is thereby prevented from practicing her Islamic right.

Still in Saudi Arabia, Khadra goes out with the daughter of her parents’ friends and mistakenly finds herself in a limousine of young, rich kids high on drugs and engaging in various forms of illicit sexual behavior. While she is scandalized by all this, they expect her to embrace it, as she is, after all, the “*American cousin*” and “*American girl*.” “Surely you don’t wear that thing in America,” one of the boys asks her, referring to her veil as he tries to take it off her head. When she tries to push him off her, he persist in groping and kissing her, claiming, “no one can see us,” “we’ve got our clothes on—and you grew up in *America*—don’t tell me you never do stuff like this in America” (Kahf 2006, 178). Even when Khadra manages to get out of the limousine and away from his grip, the friend asks, “What’s the matter, is this not as fun as what you do in America?” (Kahf 2006, 178). What is implied by these comments is that Americans are never chaste or modest, and so as an American, Khadra would not be either. Rather than consider his actions for what they are, sexual assault, the youngsters expect her to embrace them. In fact, rejecting them is considered backwards. Positioned as an Arab, American, Muslim woman, the order of which changes depending on context, Khadra is able, in narrative retrospect, to critique them all, “speak[ing] effectively to, with, and against several audiences” (cooke 2001, 81).
MULTIPLE CRITIQUE: FATHER FIGURES

Still within the matrix of gender relations, fathers and other male kin are usually stereotyped as oppressors of women, marrying off their daughters at a young age, beating them, and keeping them secluded. Nonetheless, as Serageldin points out, “father/daughter relations in the writings of Arab women go against the grain of preconceptions, with fathers overwhelmingly portrayed in positive, supportive roles” (Serageldin 2004, 137). Indeed, it is, after all, a certain Uncle Taher who educates Khadra and Eyyad about the first Muslim. In Serageldin’s The Cairo House, even though the protagonist, Gigi, is forced to leave her son behind in Egypt with her ex-husband because of patriarchal laws, she has a very close relationship with her own father who, under sequestration, becomes a humble, honest, and real person to her.

Notably, as mentioned earlier, Serageldin does not shy away from criticizing Arab men when they are oppressive, performing “unfettered” writing that does not play into stories of exceptionalism as told by “moderate Muslims.” The Naqib’s daughter is based on Napoléon Bonaparte’s campaign in Egypt in 1798, and in the historical note to the novel, Serageldin writes that the historical texts on the campaign mention a certain Naqib named Shaykh Bakri who had married his daughter off to Bonaparte to further his political career. After the evacuation of the French, many Egyptian women who were married to Frenchmen were put on trial and accused of collaborating. Shaykh Bakri’s daughter, Zeinab, was one of those women. “[F]earful of being held to account for his own collaborationist role, [he] disavowed her, claiming, ‘I wash my hands of her fate’” (Serageldin 2008, loc. 4878). Serageldin recreates the scene of the trial in full, depicting Zeinab wildly turning to her father in disbelief, “surely he would tell them that he himself had sent her to the French to be married to Bonaparte? Surely he would save her? But Shaykh Bakri did not meet her eyes; he threw his hands up in the air. ‘I wash my hands of her fate!’” (Serageldin 2008, loc. 3233). Serageldin thus recreates this “footnote” of history, but never makes excuses for Shaykh Bakri’s treatment. Rather, she contextualizes his actions in the nuances and complexities of circumstance, desire, emotion, and belief, all the while exposing that it is a woman who bears the injustices of history.
In Susan Abulhawa’s *The Blue between sky and water* (2015), Nur is the American granddaughter of the Palestinian refugee Mamdouh with whom she has an intensely close relationship, so close that they together compose a book called *Jiddo and me*. As a child, she lives in his custody after her father dies in a car accident, but when her grandfather himself also dies, she is returned to live with her mother, a selfish woman who neglects to bathe her and feed her, and only tries to prove she loves her to the social worker Nzinga to get Mamdouh’s money. Later it is Sam, her mother’s white American boyfriend, who sexually abuses Nur at the “ripe age of nine” (Abulhawa 2015, 90), and for the doctors to find out exactly what had happened, “[S]he was allowed to draw pictures to show what Sam had done to her. She thought she had to draw what she had done to Sam too, so she did, and it made Nzinga cry” (Abulhawa 2015, 90). It is not her mother who turns Sam in, though—on the contrary, her mother abandons Nur to foster care and remains with Sam; rather, it is her Tío Santiago, her mother’s brother, who notices the signs of neglect and sexual abuse on little Nur’s body, and so it is he, along with her Jiddo Mamdouh, who make their way into her special book, *Jiddo and me*.

In *Crescent* (2004), Diana Abu-Jaber presents a comic rendering of the complex relationship between women and their male kin, revealing the oppressive effect of patriarchy on both. At her Thanksgiving dinner, one of the guests, a student from Egypt named Shark (meaning east and not the fish, even though the protagonist, Sirine, the daughter of an Irish American mother and an Iraqi father, cannot hear the difference) relates an incident that took place with his sister, Maisoon. His father finds out that Maisoon has been kissing a boy, and so demands he beat her for it. Everyone at the table is shocked and yet intrigued to find out if Shark actually does beat his sister, which he describes as: “We jumped up and down” (Abu-Jaber 2004, 219). Noticing their hunger for clarification, Shark explains:

> We closed the bathroom door and I said, let’s jump. And we started jumping and hitting the walls and I was shouting all kinds of stuff like slut and whore and stuff. And Maisoon was screaming like I was pulling teeth out of her head. (Abu-Jaber 2004, 219–20)
When they eventually come out of the bathroom, his parents are shocked, telling him they did not expect him to beat her so badly. Everyone at the dinner table laughs, but Nathan, a white American, says restlessly, “Really, I mean—there’s the treatment of Arab women for you, right there. The whole attitude” (Abu-Jaber 2004, 220). The precise attitude that makes for the referent of the “there” in his statement is not clear, though. Is it the attitude that parents insist brothers beat their sisters into discipline and honor that he is referring to? Is it brothers wanting to protect their sisters from the violence of patriarchy and therefore only pretend to be the essentialized aggressive male figure? Is it that the entire system of patriarchy is a theatrical farce? The statement’s ambiguity participates in multiple critique to assert that there is no cut-and-dried “treatment of Arab women” that can be clearly represented as the treatment of Arab/Muslim women, and Arab American women writers are quick to show that with all the nuance they can muster.

MULTIPLE CRITIQUE: FOOD

Because community coalesces around it, food offers another space for women writers to perform multiple critique and redefine American, Arab, and Muslim experiences.

In Crescent, the protagonist Sirine is a chef at a Middle Eastern restaurant, and her relationship with cooking reveals a kind of feminist critique that, although not quite the Islamic feminism of Khadra in Girl or the explicitly political woman-of-color critique Hammad engages, offers a different way of thinking about gender in both American and Arab contexts. While it is on some levels a love story, Sirine is, refreshingly, middle-aged and not the clichéd perky twenty-something year-old looking for love—she is thirty-nine at the beginning of the novel and forty-two by its end. She lives in California, which she has always considered home, and feels “complete and whole” when she cooks (Abu-Jaber 2004, 218). While food and women are used together to symbolize the home, especially for men, throughout the novel Sirine refuses to be turned into that symbol.
Cooking for her is more powerful than love because “as long as she can cook, she would be loved” (Abu-Jaber 2004, 218), but she does not cook to seduce men or to consolidate her romance with the Iraqi professor Hanif. For instance, Hanif delights at her *freekeh* (a meal of smoked, toasted wheat) because it reminds him of home, and so it is all he eats at Thanksgiving. Later, though, when he asks her to make him *freekeh* again, she chooses to make him a simple dish of scrambled eggs instead, which he eats heartily nonetheless (Abu-Jaber 2004, 232). When they fall out later in the novel, her gesture of reconciliation is not his beloved *freekeh*, but rather rice with pine nuts (Abu-Jaber 2004, 327). While her cooking may take Hanif back home to Iraq, for Sirine, it allows her “to find her home, not back in Iraq but in the U.S.” (Fadda-Conrey 2014, 42).

When she cooks, it is the love of and a sense of belonging to an entire community that makes her feel complete and whole. This community is not delineated by religion, like the community of the Dawah Center, nor is it a racial or ethnic community limited to people of color or Arab Americans. Her community is one of the most American of communities in its diversity, and comes together most clearly in the Arabic Thanksgiving that she hosts.

The Thanksgiving meal consists of eclectic dishes that harmoniously come together: traditional cornbread and cranberries alongside lentils, *faṭāʾir* (small meat, spinach, or cheese pies), and *freekeh*. The meal “produces hybrid culinary fragments that seemingly embody or reproduce an original homeland but are nonetheless rooted in the immediacy of U.S. cultural landscape” (Fadda-Conrey 2014, 43). This allows it to be read as a metaphor through which to rethink the authenticity of “Arabic” food as well as the authenticity of a “traditional” American Thanksgiving. Like her guests, who come from diverse backgrounds and yet are all American, they each contribute a dish that comes from different parts of the world: Umm Nadia, of Lebanese descent and the owner of the café Sirine works at, contributes the cranberry sauce; Aziz, an Iraqi poet, brings the *faṭāʾir* from an Iranian bakery; Cristobal, who is from El Salvador and works at Umm Nadia’s café, brings whole roasted walnuts in chili sauce; and Victor, from Mexico, brings homemade pumpkin pies (Abu-Jaber 2004, 216–17). Importantly, and refreshingly, Umm
Nadia does not bring anything typically “Lebanese”, such as tabbouleh, hummus, or falafel, nor does Victor bring anything typically “Mexican”, such as tacos or guacamole. The multiple foods brought by people of multiple backgrounds defy the essentialist logic of belonging and allow all these Americans subjectivities’ to be formed along multiple lines of identification.

To further resist the notion of authentic, nationalized cuisine, Sirine prepares her foods creatively rather than adhering to more traditional methods. For instance, for making tabbouleh, the novel suggests “toss[ing] ingredients together in a nice bowl” after they have been prepared (Abu-Jaber 2004, 400). Traditionalists would object to doing this because it would make the parsley soggy and because there is a specific order to assembling tabbouleh ingredients. Similarly, when Sirine makes Hanif coffee, she places the coffee in the water before adding the sugar (Abu-Jaber 2004, 327). Traditionalists would argue that the sugar goes in before the coffee because otherwise the sugar does not dissolve properly or distribute equally. Finally, Sirine places lemon zest in the coffee when she runs out of cardamom. All these instances convey a new kind of Arabic cuisine. Located in the United States, it offers room for negotiation and experimentation—and is no less “authentic” that its original influence—but it is now Arab American.

Food as a space for community marked by multiple vectors of identification also emerges in Girl. Khadra and Eyad follow their secular Muslim friend Joy home to find themselves amidst a kibbe-making commotion. Immediately, they are not only invited to participate in the enterprise, but also expected to do so—Eyad included, even though he expects to be exempted from women’s work and “be escorted to the living room to sit with the men” (Kahf 2006, 188). The kibbe-making is described as “a great and complex task, requiring a whole clan in the kitchen, way beyond the grasp of the lonely nuclear family in America severed from the web of extended family” (Kahf 2006, 188). This clan extends not only beyond the nuclear family, but also across a diversity of peoples, just like Sirine’s Arabic Thanksgiving. This particular kibbe-making clan is preparing the dish for an Arab Pride festival at St. George’s Church, and
making kibbe for an Arabic Christian community surprises Khadra and Eyad. Khadra, though, reflects on the enterprise:

Khadra glanced at their hostess’ face, her features so familiarly Syrian, her cadence and voice equally so. What other homes of similar sweetness and joy had they passed by all these years, insisting as they did on their separateness and specialness, then? *What a waste?* (Kahf 2006, 189, emphasis added).

Despite her insular upbringing, Khadra finds community among people she had been raised not to mix with on account of their being different, even inferior. Her reaction to this realization is one of the most important realizations of the multiplicity of her own subjectivity. The creation of hierarchies and the myth that people who are different are inferior is for her, “a waste”—of bonding, of community, of learning, of healing. This is a critical message of the novel and of Arab American women writers engaging in multiple critique.

CONCLUSIONS: INESCAPABLE SCHEHERAZADE AND THE HEALING POWER OF STORIES

While an incredibly heterogeneous group, Arab American women writers could be characterized as writers whose works engage, whether purposely or not, in multiple critique because of transnational and multiple vectors of belonging. Bearing the burden of cultural translators but also aware of the risks of being native informants, Arab American women simultaneously write into existence and critique the complexity of being Arab and Muslim in a global terrain were orientalist discourses, stereotypes, and “moderate Muslims” shout to diminish their voices.

As a “subalternized group,” they assume “its essentialized representations and use them strategically against those who have ascribed them” (cooke 2001, 155). This can be seen in the ubiquitous figure of Scheherazade, the embodiment of the over-sexualized odalisque, the “intelligent woman
schooled in literature, philosophy, and history” but turned into “sex kitten when Antoine Galland, and later Richard Burton, introduced [The Thousand and One] Nights to the European canon in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries” (Darraj 2004, 2). In spite of the content of Darraj’s anthology, which aims to debunk this stereotype of Scheherazade, its cover depicts an essentialist, exotic image of what is supposed to be an Arab woman. Pauline Homsi Vinson notes this contradiction, writing that:

The disconnect between Darraj’s vision of Scheherazade and the book publisher’s idea of how best to market it to American audiences reveals the challenges facing women writers of Arab backgrounds in the United States. On the one hand, Arab American women’s stories are welcomed by an eager audience; on the other, these same stories are obscured by stereotypical images of Arab women and Islam. (Vinson 2015, 14).

The persistence of this and other such stereotypes of Arab women “necessitates the simultaneous resurrection and debunking of the cultural mythology that surrounds the images of Arab women in the United States,” and readers must be ready for this confrontation (Vinson 2015, 15). In other words, readers must be ready to listen.

Lalami’s The Moor’s Account (2014) can be read as an argument for such listening. The novel is an intervention into the official narrative of the historical Narváez expedition to conquer La Florida, as narrated in Cabeza de Vaca’s La relación (1555). There, Lalami encounters a sole line referring to a fourth survivor of the expedition, a certain “Estevanico, an Arab Negro from Azamor” (quoted in Lalami 2014, Acknowledgments). To save that life, which in a mere sentence was forever condemned to silence by the official records of those with the gunpowder, Lalami chooses to tell the story of Mustafa ibn Muhammad ibn Abdulssalam al-Zamori—where he was born; how he became a slave; how he came to be part of the expedition; who he loved, married, and longed for; and where he found his final resting place.

While the figure of Scheherazade appears in the novel in Mustafa’s mother, he admits she “was not Scheherazade” (Lalami 2014, 27) (his “father was not Antara on his steed” either, Lalami 2014, 27).
Although he characterizes her as a storyteller and credits her for learning the art of story-telling, the novel never essentializes or idealizes this storytelling as “Arab” or Scheherazade-like. Rather, telling stories is presented as a universal form of healing, present in the traditions of the various tribes they encounter on the expedition as well as among the conquering Spaniards.

One of the most important components of the healing power of stories, though, comes from listening. Learning this at a young age in the markets of Azemmur, Mustafa later employs it when healing the sick: “I listened to the sick man or woman and offered consolation in the guise of a long story. After all, what the sufferers needed most was an assurance that someone understood their pain and that, if not a full cure, at least some respite from it lay further ahead” (Lalami 2014, 231). In fact, in the novel, violence emerges when someone cannot be moved by the power of words, which Mustafa finds coarse, obdurate, and even inhuman (Lalami 2014, 269).

On the official story of the expedition, Mustafa understands that Cabeza de Vaca’s narrative is full of erasures, exaggerations, and lies to be made “suitable for the royal court, the cardinals and inquisitors, the governors and officials” (Lalami 2014, 286). Unfortunately, these “written records were synonymous with power” (Lalami 2014, 287), and it is for that reason that only one man’s “sterile account of our travels would always be considered the truth” (Lalami 2014, 313). This causes a “small rebellion [to] bubble within” (Lalami 2014, 313) because Mustafa knows that singularity does not speak truth; multiplicity does. He says that:

as I spent time with the Indians I came to see how limiting the notion of one true faith really was. Was the diversity in our beliefs, not their unity, the lesson God wanted to impart? Surely it would have been in His power to make us all of one faith if that had been His wish. Now the idea that there was only one set of stories for all mankind seemed strange to me. (Lalami 2014, 276)
Similarly, Mustafa echoes this sentiment of diversity and multiplicity in relation to the truth of the expedition. Cabeza de Vaca’s is only one story; the Indians will have their own; his, which bursts from the bubbles of rebellion, is yet one other:

Maybe there is no true story, only imagined stories, vague reflections of what we saw and what we heard, what we felt and what we thought. Maybe if our experiences, in all of their glorious, magnificent colors, were somehow added up, they would lead us to the blinding light of truth. (Lalami 2014, 321)

This blinding, healing light of truth, though, can only emerge if it is given visibility and an audience willing to listen.

While Arab American writers bear the responsibility of cultural translator, the reader also bears a responsibility: the responsibility to listen. While they never present a story about “the” Arab or Muslim woman, they do tell very compelling ones about experiences unique to the United States, stories where race, religion, gender relations, the law, and community are central. Theirs are stories of exploration, not representation—exploration of the self and the American terrain, spaces where “meanings are not absolute but are constantly constructed anew” (cooke 2001, 155). It is in this way that Arab American women writers fight as much to speak (Spivak’s subaltern could always speak), as to be heard.

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