MARIE-CHRISTIN SAWIRES-MASSELI

Arab American Novels Post-9/11

Classical Storytelling Motifs Against Outsidership

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Heijab Scene #7
No, I'm not bald under the scarf
No, I'm not from that country
where women can't drive cars
No, I would not like to defect
I'm already American
But thank you for offering
What else do you need to know
relevant to my buying insurance,
opening a bank account,
reserving a seat on a flight?
Yes, I speak English
Yes, I carry explosives
They're called words
And if you don't get up
Off your assumptions,
They're going to blow you away.

Mohja Kahf[1]

1 Introduction

Arab American Literature and Identity

After 9/11, the literary market experienced an upsurge in Arab American literature, and a niche previously overlooked for the most part suddenly received high attention. Although there has been Arab American literature prior to 9/11, it had rarely been marketed as such; in consequence, most scholarly work on Arab American fiction begins with an attempt to define the emerging category: what is Arab American Literature? In entering this discussion, most scholars focus on the homogeneity of Arab Americans, as well as on the different

[1] Kahf, Mohja. *E-mails from Scheherazad*. Gainesville, University Press of Florida (2003), 39.

accentuation of the Arab and the American part; yet the term's problems begin long before the combination of both identities.

Is there an Arab identity?

In an introduction to a MELUS[2] edition on Arab American literature, Hassan and Knopf-Newman assert:

> Determining an Arab American subjectivity is also complicated by the Arab side of the hyphen. Arabness has in the past operated as a marker of national belonging, notably in connection with the Pan-Arab movements that developed in opposition to colonialism in the mid-twentieth century. But even at the high point of Pan-Arab nationalism, defining Arabness was an elusive endeavor, complicated by regionalisms, petty nationalisms, and religious affiliations.[3]

Indeed, while the elusiveness of the idea to define an Arab identity is obvious, one may dispute the qualification of nationalisms as "petty", considering that the so-called Arab world spans two continents and the Arab League today counts 22 member states with different histories, religions, and ethnicities.[4] In light of the sheer dimension of the Arab world, it would appear impossible to pin down Arab identity to one single concept. As Albert Hourani notes, the term 'Arab' originally denoted only the ethnic Arabs of the Arabian Peninsula, then expanded to include all Arabic-speaking nations;[5] now, the Arab League also includes states which have not set Arabic as their primary language (such as Somalia and Comores). Since Arabic spread with Islam's expansion, the two are viewed as closely linked, and 'Arab' has come close to connote "Muslim" in common usage, in spite of the existence of

[2] MELUS stands for Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States.

[3] Hassan, Salah D. and Marcy Jane Knopf-Newman. "Introduction." *MELUS* 31: 4 (2006), 3-13. 4.

[4] The Arab League currently consists of Algeria, Bahrein, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, State of Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, Yemen. See: http://www.lasportal.org/

[5] See Hourani, Albert. *A History of the Arab Peoples*. Cambridge, The Belknap Press of Harvard UP (1991), 49.

non-Muslim minorities in the Middle East until today. Now, Arab identity is perceived as covering a large geographical area of many different ethnicities, and until fairly recently, most citizens of these countries did not self-identity as Arabs but as citizens of their country first.[6]

The origins of Pan-Arabism: a political idea

Bassam Tibi traces the origins of Pan-Arabism back to the Ottoman Empire, a political movement he demonstrates to have been secular: Pan-Arabism began as a strife of a variety of peoples for emancipation from Ottoman rule, pitting a Turkish identity against an Arab one.[7] Later, Arab nationalism was revived in a new variant as an answer to European colonialism,[8] which was in turn replaced 1952 by yet another variant of Pan-Arabism, i.e. Nasserism, then Egyptian President Gamal Abdel-Nasser's ideology of Arab unity against the newly created state of Israel; however, Pan-Arabism as a Nasserist ideology lost momentum after three wars lost against Israel.[9] Although it has lost its appeal for the majority, it continues to loom large in regional and international politics. Thus, from the very beginning, Pan-Arabism has always been more of a political identity than a religious or cultural one, whether it was revolution against the oppressive Ottoman Empire, an independence movement against colonialism, or a united front against Israel; it mainly marked an oppositional stance.

[6] In fact, several Middle Eastern countries view themselves as Arabized but with a different identity; Iraq is proud of its Chaldean and Assyrian past, Syria and Lebanon emphasize their Phoenician roots, Egyptians their old Pharaonic civilization, and Tunesia honors its Christian and Roman past. See Baram, Amatzia. "Territorial Nationalism in the Middle East." *Middle Eastern Studies* 26:4 (1990), 425-448.

[7] Tibi, Bassam. *Arab Nationalism between Islam and the Nation-State*. London, Macmillan Press (1997), 88-101, 113.

[8] Tibi, *Arab Nationalism*, 183.

[9] Tibi, *Arab Nationalism*, 214.

Pan-Arabism today

Today, most Arabic-speaking countries identify first with their own nation, second with being "Arabs," since it has become inevitable due to Middle Eastern politics, yet it still is a highly contended concept. Abu-Jaber aptly caricatures the instinctive aversion felt by many Middle Easterners at being labeled Arab, except for those of the Arabian peninsula:

> No one ever wants to be the Arab – it's too old and too tragic and too mysterious and too exasperating and too lonely for anyone but an actual Arab to put up with for very long. Essentially, it's an image problem. Ask anyone, Persians, Turks, even Lebanese and Egyptians – none of them want to be the Arab. They say things like, really we're Indo-Russian-Asian-European-Chaldeans. So in the end, the only one who gets to be the Arab is the same little old Bedouin with his goats and his sheep and his poetry about his goats and his sheep, because he doesn't know that he's the Arab, and what he doesn't know won't hurt him.10 (emphasis mine)

Therefore, to define Arab culture as such is highly problematic and runs the risk of essentializing; notwithstanding, there may be common ground, and today, it is through Pan-Arab media that the different Middle Eastern cultures unify more than before. Pintak claims that the two most-viewed channels, al-Jazeera and al-Arabiyya, among others, work to produce "a new common Arab consciousness every bit as salient as the 'imagined communities' that Benedict Anderson tells us are at the core of the concept of nation."[11] While the differences between the countries are still too vast to speak of an emerging nationhood, it is certainly true that Pan-Arab media have strengthened the imagined community of the Arab *umma*[12].

[10] Abu-Jaber, Diana. *Crescent.* New York, W. W. Norton (2004), 54-55.

[11] Pintak, Lawrence. "Border Guards of the 'Imagined' *Watan*: Arab Journalists and the New Arab Consciousness." *The Middle East Journal* 63:2 (2009), 191-192.

[12] The *umma*, as Hourani explains, is "the community of believers" (57), of all Muslims. This is the basic concept for an Islamic caliphate, encompassing all Muslim countries, ruled by one caliph (who would officiate as the Prophet

Arabs in America

Ultimately, it is politics and perception which complicate Arab identity, since not every one labeled ‘Arab’ agrees with Pan-Arab politics but these same politics tie into the concept of Arab identity. On American soil, this identity became even more politicized; for a long time, immigrants from the Middle East had not entered the USA as ‘Arabs’ but as subjects of the Ottoman Empire, thus were categorized as Turks, Syrians, Asians. Arab immigration to the USA is commonly divided into three waves, of which only the last two partially identified as Arab. Gregory Orfalea[13] determines the first wave from 1924 to 1947, which mostly consisted of Christians from Greater Syria, meaning Syrians and Lebanese; the second wave as 1947-1966, of which the majority came due to upheavals in their own country, bringing many Palestinians, but in general a more diverse group than the first wave; the third wave as 1967-2005, consisting mostly of Palestinians but also of Copts and Iraqi Chaldeans fleeing discrimination by a Muslim majority.[14] Orfalea explains the majority of immigrants after 1948 to have been Muslim and often politically active, while the first wave was largely apolitical. In writing about the high number of Palestinian immigrants, Gualtieri connects their politics to the construct of Arab identity:

> [I]n the legal discourses of the 1940’s, the term Arab did not mean, as it does today in its most general sense, speakers of Arabic, but persons born in the Arabian Peninsula and, increasingly, Arabic-speaking Muslims from Mandate Palestine.[15]

According to Orfalea, immigrants from Mandate Palestine and later Israel arrived politicized, as opposed to the earlier Syrian and Lebanese majority, and they dominated what became understood as ‘Arab

Muhammad’s successor). The last caliphate ended with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire.

[13] Orfalea, Gregory. *The Arab Americans – A History.* Northhampton, Olive Branch Press (2006).

[14] Orfalea, *The Arab Americans*, 190.

[15] Gualtieri, Sarah M. A.. *Between Arab and White: Race and Ethnicity in the Early Syrian American Diaspora*. Los Angeles, University of California Press (2009), 159.

American' politics, since they identified with 'Arab' in the face of Israel.[16] Thus, the creation of an Arab American identity was closely linked to the Middle Eastern conflict, an association many non-Palestinian Middle Easterners refused, as Gualtieri explains:

> The term was by no means widely accepted. Syrians [...] objected to it because they had embraced a more Lebanese/Phoenician identity. [...] It would be two decades before the term Arab American gained much purchase within Syrian communities in the United States. (166)
> Indeed, there is still considerable resistance among persons of Arabic-speaking origin to the term Arab American. When the AAI was gathering information to compute the size of the Arab American community, it received a barrage of protests from Lebanese Christians and Iraqi Chaldeans who objected to being included in the category 'Arab.' (189)

Notably, Christians especially protested against the category, and Gualtieri explains that they "tend not to identify with the category 'Arab' because it is closely associated with Islam in the United States" (179).

Arab American literature as a category

In view of the diversity as well as the politicized attributes of the term 'Arab American,' the difficulties in defining Arab American literature should not surprise. Even if one defines 'Arab' as designating all Arabic-speaking people, Arab American literature remains an unclear subject. Will the author's origin decide categorization, or is it fictional content? Salaita proposes to use content as salient characteristic: "A more useful methodology will place Arab American writing in its American context but locate Arab themes that distinguish it from other ethnic American literary movements."[17] In the following, I use the term "Arab American literature" with Salaita. However, it should be noted that several authors object to the categorization of their literature;

[16] Orfalea, *The Arab Americans,* 152-3; 190, 213.

[17] Salaita, Steven. "Sand Niggers, Small Shops, and Uncle Sam: Cultural Negotiation in the Fiction of Joseph Geha and Diana Abu-Jaber." *Criticism* 43: 4 (2001), 423-444. 426.

neither Abu-Jaber nor Alameddine refer to themselves as Arab American but rather as Jordanian American and Lebanese American respectively, and Alameddine generally objects to categorization of his fiction.[18]

For lack of better words, I will use the word 'Arab' to imply all Arabic-speaking countries unless otherwise specified, but since these countries are far from uniform, I will refer to the shared content of their cultures as "Arab culture(s)" to emphasize their heterogeneity within this broader group, as a claim of one Arab culture can only be essentializing.

Arab American Literature before and after 9/11

It has been argued that the events of 9/11 brought about a break in culture and therefore also in literature; it has also been argued that this break is not as incisive as imagined. However, in the field of Arab American literature, 9/11 constituted a turning point. Prior to the terrorist attacks, less Arab American literature was published; earlier Arab American novelists like Vance Bourjaily, William Peter Blatty, or Eugene Paul Nassar did not identify with a specific Arab American identity, nor did they perceive their fiction as such, but rather as a general American one.[19] "Arab themes" in the sense of Salaita's definition were less present. Furthermore, there were many poets and playwrights, some short story writers, but fewer novelists compared to today's publishing.[20] After 9/11, Arab American literature expanded considerably in Salaita's sense: these new novels clearly position themselves as Arab and as American, since they are written by Arab Americans in English, dealing with American society and American themes as well as with Arab themes; the protagonists negotiate their

[18] See Rafei's Interview with Alameddine. See also: Field, Robin. "A Prophet in Her Own Town: An Interview with Diana Abu-Jaber." *MELUS* 31:4 (2006), 207-225.

[19] See Ludescher, Tanyss. "From Nostalgia to Critique: An Overview of Arab American Literature." *MELUS* 31:4 (2006), 93-114. 101.

[20] For a detailed overview on Arab American Literature, see the bibliographies in Ludescher as well as Williams, David. "This Hyphen Called My Spinal Cord." *World Literature Today* 81:1, 55-63.

oscillating hyphenated identities, thus firmly establishing this new generation of novels as Arab American. It must be noted, however, that the 1990's already showed a slow shift towards this trend;[21] nevertheless, the largest part of novels with a strong Arab American identification appeared post-9/11, and compared to the overall sum of earlier publications, there seems to be a sudden rise in writing. On the one hand, there is a growing interest in Arab American fiction by certain groups interested in a view aside from stereotypes; on the other hand, it is safe to assume that many Arab Americans felt a new need to enter public discourse identifiably as Arab Americans, as Leila Ahmed already wrote in 1982:

> If one is of Arabic or Islamic background in America, one is almost compelled to take that stand. And what compels one is… that Americans 'know,' and know without even having to think about it, that [Muslims] are backward, uncivilized peoples totally incapable of rational conduct.[22]

Just like the people summarized as Arab Americans are an extremely diverse group, so is their fiction; but amidst all different approaches, there is one striking phenomenon in post-9/11 literature, as Lisa Suhair Majaj, herself an Arab American poet, notes:

> Of particular note in contemporary Arab American writing is an emphasis on a thematics of storytelling; in particular the narrative frame invoking Scheherazad and the Thousand and One Arabian Nights that shapes or frames a number of recent Arab American texts. Examples include Abu-Jaber's Crescent, Halaby's Once in a Promised Land, Alameddine's Hakawati, Yunis' The Night Counter, Kaldas and Mattawa's Dinarzad's Children, Kahf's Emails from Schererazad [sic], and Darraj's Scherahazad's Legacy [sic]. This reliance on 1001 Arabian Nights as a narrative frame for so many recent books is worthy of a separate investigation; while it seems to reflect in part a desire to engage more directly with Arab literary sources and to bring

[21] See Majaj, Lisa Suhair. *Transformative Acts: Arab American Writing/Writing Arab America*. Dissertation, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor (2012). ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, Web, 390. Accessed 05 June 2013.

[22] Ahmed, as cited in Elia, Nada. "Islamophobia and the 'Privileging' of Arab American Women." *NWSA Journal*. 18:3 (2006), 155-161. 159.

> those sources into the American literary context, I also wonder if this focus reflects something about the tropes available to mediate between Arab and American literary contexts. (394-395)

Indeed, this new turn towards classic Arabic storytelling motifs is striking, and so far, it has been ignored for the most part by scholars, with only Majaj pointing to the need for a separate investigation. Since the novels are all fairly recent, there is not much work on any of them, in Yunis' case, none at all.

Scholarly work on The Hakawati, Crescent, Once in a Promised Land, and The Night Counter: a short overview

So far, there is very little work on Alameddine's *The Hakawati*, and as with *Crescent*, there is some concentrating on postmodern analysis/intertextuality,[23] then one covering the treatment of Lebanese militia,[24] one on the Queering of Orientalism.[25] Mounzer's text[26] is the one most devoted to storytelling, examining genres and techniques present in *The Hakawati*; yet Mounzer takes this analysis into a completely different direction than proposed by Majaj, since she uses it to refute postmodern theory, in particular Barthes' *Death of the Author*, instead of reading the novel in its cultural context as an Arab American work. Thus, her work does not analyze how these classical elements contribute to the narrative's general scheme, but it catalogues them as

[23] Mounzer, Mia Hassan. *Authorial Deliberation and Transcendental Signification in Rabih Alameddine's 'The Hakawati'*. MA Thesis, American University of Beirut, Beirut (2009). https://scholarworks.aub.edu.lb/handle/10938/7957. Accessed 05 June 2013. See also Saleem, Sobia. "*Never Trust the Teller, " he said. "Trust the Tale": Narrative Technique from the Arabian Nights to Postmodern Adaptations by Rabih Alameddine and Pier Pasolini*. MA Thesis, University of California, Santa Cruz (2012). ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, Web. Accessed 05 June 2013. Saleem works mainly with Bakhtin.

[24] Hout, Syrine. *Post-War Anglophone Lebanese Fiction. Home Matters in the Diaspora*. Edinburgh, Edinburgh UP (2012).

[25] Hassan, Waïl S.. *Immigrant Narratives: Orientalism and Cultural Translation in Arab American and Arab British Literature* . Oxford, Oxford UP (2011).

[26] Mounzer, Authorial Deliberation.

intertextual evidence of authorial deliberation and the existence of reality in Alameddine's novel.

Scholarly work on Abu-Jaber's novel *Crescent* centers on food[27] and the shared experience of exile,[28] and interethnicity;[29] it studies the postcolonial subject,[30] stresses the invocation of Andalusia,[31] or reads the novel as a trickster story;[32] it discusses the novel as postmodern

[27] See Mehta, Brinda. "The Semiosis of Food: Diana Abu-Jaber's Crescent." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism.* Syracuse, Syracuse UP (2007), 228-265 and Mercer, Lorraine, and Linda Strom. "Cooking Up Stories of Love." *MELUS*. 32:4 (2007), 33-46. Piatti-Farnell, Lorna. *Food and Culture in Contemporary American Fiction.* London, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group (2011), 125-151.

[28] See Fadda-Conrey, Carol. "Arab American Literature in the Ethnic Borderland: Cultural Intersections in Diana Abu-Jaber's Crescent." *MELUS* 31:4 (2006), 187-206; Nyman, *Jopi. Home, Identity, and Mobility in Contemporary Diasporic Fiction*. Amsterdam, New York, Rodopi (2009). Limpár, Ildikó. "Narratives of Misplacement in Diana Abu-Jaber's Arabian Jazz, Crescent, and Origin." *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* 15:2 (2009), 249-268; Abdelrazek, Amal T.. "'Elsewhere-within-here/-there': Exiles and the Identity of Home/s in Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent*." *Contemporary Arab American Women Writers. Hyphenated Identities and Border Crossings*. Youngstown, NY, Cambria Press (2007), 175-220

[29] Gabra, Marian Helmy. *Ethnic Entanglements: A Comparative Study of Arab American and Chicano Literatures.* Dissertation, UCLA, Los Angeles (2010). ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, Web. Accessed 05 June 2013; Turjman, Ruba. *Inter-ethnic Relations in Contemporary Fiction of the Arab Diaspora in Canada, Germany, and the United States*. Dissertation, Queen's University, Kingston, Canada (2006). ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, Web. Accessed 05 June 2013.

[30] See Cariello, Marta. "Bodies Across: Ahdaf Soueif, Fadia Faqir, Diana Abu-Jaber." *Arab Voices in Diaspora. Critical Perspectives on Anglophone Arab Literature.* Ed. Layla Al Maleh. Amsterdam, New York, Rodopi, 313-338; Laouyene, Atef. *The Postexotic Arab: Orientalist Dystopias in Contemporary Postcolonial Fiction.* Dissertation, University of Ottawa (2008). ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, Web. Accessed 05 June 2013.

[31] Gana, Nouri. "In Search of Andalusia: Reconfiguring Arabness in Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent.*" *Comparative Literature Studies* 45:2 (2008), 228-247.

[32] Waller, Nicole. "Omar Sharif as Transnational Trickster: The Overlapping Geographies of Diana Abu-Jaber." *Virtually American? Denationalizing*

work;[33] examines the us of dance as a negotiation of hyphenated identity;[34] or even as a narrative against globalization.[35] With few exceptions, most work has passed over the technique of storytelling or only mentioned it fleetingly. Sabry[36] addresses the question of storytelling in general but does not provide a detailed analysis; her work pivots on the countering of Orientalism.

The case of Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* is similar: here, scholarly work has studied questions of discrimination/racism/Othering and the failure of the American Dream,[37] the depiction of Arab men,[38]

North American Studies. Ed. Mita Banerjee. Heidelberg, Winter (2009), 135-146.

[33] Yousef, Tawfiq. "Diana Abu-Jaber's Crescent as a Postmodernist Novel.“ *Dirasat* 37:1 (2010). 228-244.

[34] Schmidt, Silke. "Arabian Dance in the Promised Land: Hyphenating Identity in Contemporary Arab (-)American Women's Literature." *Arab American Literature and Culture*. Ed. Alfred Hornung and Martina Kohl. Heidelberg, Universitätsverlag Winter (2012), 171-219.

[35] Chandra, Sarika. *Dislocalism. The Crisis of Globalization and the Remobilizing of Americanism*. Columbus, Ohio State UP (2011).

[36] Sabry, Somaya Sami. *Arab-American Women's Writing and Performance: Orientalism, Race and the Idea of the Arabian Nights.* London, I. B. Tauris (2011).

[37] See Banita, Georgiana. "Race, Risk, and Fiction in the War on Terror: Laila Halaby, Gayle Brandeis, and Michael Cunningham." *Literature Interpretation Theory* 21 (2010), 242-268; DeRosa, Aaron. *Nationalism and Alterity in Laily Halaby and Jess Walter*. Essay, Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana (2011). <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/revisioning/2011/909/11/>. Accessed 05 June 2013; Fadda-Conrey, Carol. "Arab American Citizenship in Crisis: Destabilizing Representations of Arabs and Muslims in the US after 9/11." *Modern Fiction Studies.* 57:3 (2011), 532-555.; Lloyd, Amanda. *Reverse Orientalism: Laila Halaby's 'Once in a Promised Land'*. Cleveland State University (2012). ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, Web. Accessed 05 June 2013; Naydan, Liliana. *Faith in Fiction: American Literature, Religion and the Millenium*. Dissertation, Stony Brook University (2011). ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, Web. Accessed 05 June 2013.

[38] Bosch, Marta. "Post-9/11 Representations of Arab Masculinities by Arab American Women Writers: Criticism or Praise?" *Men In Color. Racialized Masculinities in U.S. Literature and Cinema.* Ed. Josep M. Armengol. Newcastle, Cambridge Scholars Publishing (2011).

9/11 as a trauma,[39] and the question of Muslim identity;[40] Richard Gray in his very short overview[41] mentions Halaby's use of the conventions of fairy tales but does not analyze it much further.

For unknown reasons, there is no scholarly work yet on Alia Yunis' *The Night Counter*, making it a gap all the more rewarding to work on in this context.

Guiding questions and theoretical approach of this study

My aim in this project is to look at Arab American novels post-9/11 with the following questions: what characterizes modern Arab American novels? Did 9/11 influence or inspire writers, is it discussed in their novels? Considering the sudden upsurge in Arab American publishing, I posit a correlation between political climate and the impetus to write. How do these writers depict Arab Americans, their community, their identity? How do they view their position in American society, do they cast their protagonists as integrated and/or assimilated? Do they represent Arab Americans as outsiders to American society, or as established members? How do the writers poeticize these issues, and what sets them apart from American mainstream? As I began comparing the novels, the storytelling motif with specific classical Arabic elements emerged as a dominant theme, and like Majaj, I believe this to be worthwhile of a closer study. Therefore, the main question under which

[39] DeRosa, Aaron. *Evolving Wounds: Cultural Trauma, the Atomic Bomb, and September 11*. Dissertation, Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana (2012). ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, Web. Accessed 05 June 2013; Flink, Patric J.. *Social Reactions to Nationally Traumatic Events: Literary Analyses of America's Alter Ego*. MA Thesis, National University, San Diego (2008). ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, Web. Accessed 05 June 2013; Tancke, Ulrike. "Uses and Abuses of Trauma in Post-9/11 Fiction and Contemporary Culture." *From Solidarity to Schisms. 9/11 and After in Fiction and Film from Outside the US*. Ed. Cara Cilano. Amsterdam, New York, Rodopi (2009), 75-91.

[40] Nash, Geoffrey. *Writing Muslim Identity*. London, New York, Continuum Intl. Publishing Group (2012), 108-116.

[41] Gray, Richard. *After the Fall. American Literature Since 9/11*. Chichester, John Wiley & Sons Ltd (2011), 114-125.

I will analyze the others above will be: how do these novels employ motifs of classical Arabic storytelling, and to what aim? Do they plainly continue traditions, or do they adapt them to form new meaning?

Thus, the following chapters will examine Abu-Jaber's *Crescent*, Alameddine's *The Hakawati*, Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land*, and Yunis' *The Night Counter* in the light of these questions. I limit my analysis to these four novels according to the following criteria: Arab American fiction post-9/11, written in an American context yet explicitly dealing with Arab themes, and recurring to classical Arab storytelling traditions. Therefore, I will exclude other worthwhile Arab American novels like Randa Jarrar's *A Map of Home*, Frances Khirallah Noble's *The Next Bellydancer of the Galaxy*, or Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, to mention only a few.[42] While these novels are distinctly concerned with Arab American themes, they do not draw on classical Arabic storytelling in the same manner. For better comparability, the study will be limited to novels, thus excluding other works mentioned by Majaj in the context of Arabic storytelling, since to compare novels with poems with short stories with anthologies would require a larger scope.[43]

To obtain a differentiated view on treatment of integration, assimilation, outsidership and establishment, the novels' representation of the outsider's position in America's society will be compared with

[42] For the same reason, I will also exclude other novels by the same authors which appeared post-9/11: Halaby's *West of the Jordan* does not recur to classic Arab tradition, and Abu-Jaber's last two novels, *Origin* and *Birds in Paradise*, do not deal with Arab subjects. *Origin* is a mystery novel about a woman searching for her roots, and *Birds of Paradise* narrates the story of a family's struggle after their teenaged daughter runs away. On Abu-Jaber's own website, *Birds of Paradise* is announced as a break with the "niche": "But if anyone still thinks of her as a niche, multicultural, hyphenated-American author just because she has a hyphen in her name, they are in for a big surprise with BIRDS OF PARADISE". <http://www.dianaabujaber.com/writing/birds/>, accessed 25 September 2013.

[43] Pauline Kaldas and Khaled Mattawa's *Dinarzad's Children* is an anthology of contemporary Arab American writing; Mohja Kahf's *E-Mails from Scheherazad* is a poem collection, and Susan Muaddi Darraj's *Scheharazade's Legacy* is a collection of Arab American Women's Writing.

relational sociology where appropriate,[44] mostly with Norbert Elias' sociological work *The Established and the Outsiders*[45] and Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and symbolic power.[46] Of course,

[44] The synthesis of literary analysis with relational sociology has been done before; see for example Buschendorf, Christa, et al. *Civilizing and Decivilizing Processes: Figurational Approaches to American Culture.* Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishers (2011); Buschendorf, Christa. "'Properly speaking, there are in the world no such men as self-made men': Frederick Douglass's Exceptional Position in the Field of Slavery." *Intellectual Authority and Literary Culture in the US, 1790-1900.* Ed. Günter Leypoldt. Heidelberg, Winter (2013), 159-184; Müller, Stefanie. *The Presence of the Past in the Novels of Toni Morrison*. Heidelberg, Winter (2013).

[45] Elias, Norbert, and John L. Scotson. *The Established and the Outsiders: A Sociological Enquiry into Community Problems.* 2nd edition. London, Sage (1994).

[46] Bourdieu explains *habitus* as follows: "social agents are endowed with habitus, inscribed in their bodies by past experiences. These systems of schemes of perception, appreciation and action enable them to perform acts of practical knowledge, based on the identification and recognition of conditional, conventional stimuli to which they are predisposed to react; and, without any explicit definition of ends or rational calculation of means, to generate appropritate and endlessly renewed strategies, but within the limits of the structural constraints of which they are the product and which define them." (Bourdieu, Pierre. *Pascalian Meditations.* Stanford, CA, Stanford UP (2000), 138). Habitus thus also follows history: "Thus, because habitus is, as its name suggests, a product of a history, the instruments of construction of the social that it invests in practical knowledge of the world and in action are socially constructed, in other words structured by the world that they structure." (*Pascalian Meditations*, 148.)I use his term 'symbolic power' as defined by Bourdieu here: "Symbolic power – as a power of constituting the given through utterances, of making people see and believe, of confirming or transforming the vision of the world and, thereby, action on the world and thus the world itself, an almost magical power which enables one to obtain the equivalent of what is obtained through force (whether physical or economic), by virtue of the specific effect of mobilization – is a power that can be exercised only if it is *recognized*, that is, misrecognized as arbitrary. This means that symbolic power does not reside in 'symbolic systems' in the form of an 'illocutionary force' but that it is defined in and through a given relation between those who exercise power and those who submit to it, i.e. in the very

neither can literature be reduced to sociological claims, nor is this an attempt to "validate" the authors' arguments through sociological theory; but by regarding the novels under the aspect of how they portray social figurations, we gain new insights. Considering that literature reflects back on society, it is not incompatible with relational sociology. Edward Said, in tracing the discourse of Orientalism in literature, states: "[S]ociety and literary culture can only be understood and studied together."[47], and: "A literary text speaks more or less directly of a living reality."[48]

While the aim of this work is to analyze the use of classic Arabic storytelling motifs in modern Arab American literature, I posit that this needs to be supported by relational sociology, since the storytelling motifs are used to convey criticism of discrimination, of Arab American outsidership. To analyze literature only with sociology would mean ignoring the aesthetic dimension of the texts, since the novels are art, not scientific data. However, to exclude relational sociology would mean ignoring the critical dimension within storytelling. As the authors use classical Arab American storytelling motifs to depict Arab American outsidership, a thorough analysis of their work must combine both dimensions.

There are many parallels between Elias' theoretical elucidations and some authors' literary poeticization of the outsider's position, hence, reading their work with figurational theory provides access to an otherwise in literary theory rather unknown subject, allowing the literary critic to operate with a set of predefined technical terms. What marks Elias' theory is his different approach to phenomenons like racism. It is Elias' basic premise that terms like "racism" only serve to mask power structures; according to Elias, people do not discriminate against each other because of color or ethnicity in the first place, but rather out of an

structure of the field in which *belief* is produced and reproduced. What creates the power of words and slogans, a power capable of maintaining or subverting the social order, is the belief in the legitimacy of words and of those who utter them." (*Language and Symbolic Power,* 170; see works cited).

[47] Said, Edward. *Orientalism*, 27.

[48] Ibid. 291.

interest to maintain their status, prestige, and power. Mainly, they do so because they *can*.[49]

This claim opposes traditional views on phenomenons like racism and xenophobia, but Elias bases his claim on a field study conducted in Winston Parva, a small town in Englan. He and John L. Scotson observed in the village a behavior fitting classic racism, only it was not a confrontation between two ethnicities but actually of two groups who seemed rather indistinguishable at first sight. Winston Parva had been an old, English working-class community, into which a new group of the English working-class arrived.[50] The older inhabitants exhibited disdainful and exclusionist behavior, priding themselves on superior qualities which the new group supposedly lacked. Instead, they identified the newcomers with uncleanliness and uncivilized behavior (anomy), attributes typically ascribed to foreigners by racists. The new group was not allowed to intermingle with the older group, and the older group shunned them as true outsiders, not permitting them to share clubs and the like.

Since race could not be the reason for this division while their behavior betrayed typical racist qualities, Elias came to reassess the notion of race itself being at the root of discrimination.[51] Elias'

[49] "The problem was [...] structural characteristics of the developing community of Winston Parva bound two groups to each other in such a way that the members of one of them felt impelled, and had sufficient power resources, to treat those of another group collectively with a measure of contempt, as people less well bred and thus of lower human value, by comparison with themselves." (Elias, *Established and Outsiders*, xxi)

[50] "The two groups [...] were not different with regard to their social class, their nationality, their ethnic or racial descent, their religious denomination or their educational level. The principal difference between the two groups was precisely this: that one was a group of old residents established in the neighbourhood for two or three generations and the other was a group of newcomers." (*Established and Outsiders*, xxi-xxii)

[51] "The evidence suggests that [...] these features [discrimination] are not due to racial or ethnic differences themselves but to the fact that one is an established group, with superior power resources, and the other an outsider group, greatly inferior in terms of its power ratio [...]. What one calls 'race relations', in other words, are simply established-outsider relationships of a particular type. [...] Nor is the designation 'racial prejudice' particularly apt. The aversion [...] felt by members of an established group for those of an outsider group [...] are

deduction from the Winston Parva study was that "racism" as a term masks a fight for power. As he explains, human groups are in a continuous struggle over power, resources, money, prestige etc. In the Winston Parva case, the older group felt threatened by the newcomers in several ways: they feared for their jobs, for their life standards, for their communal traditions, their statuts, their social structure. Consequently, they discriminated against the newcomers in order to preserve their status quo.

Having understood this as a basic power struggle, Elias proceeded to analyze their discriminatory strategies. While these are fundamentally the same strategies found in racism, Elias managed to describe them at a general, deductive level, free from racial discourse and specifics. Therefore, his findings can be applied to any configuration of outsiders and established groups, since his theory reveals patterns of discrimination rather than focusing on questions of color and looks. As such, his model can be very useful when reading literature, since his model reveals structural power imbalances often portrayed in literature, enabling the reader to recognize patterns. Elias himself later added a chapter to *The Established and the Outsiders*, "The Maycomb Model", in which he analyzed such patterns in Harper Lee's novel *To Kill A Mockingbird*. Since most of the four novels I examine explicitly deal with Arab Americans, American society, and discrimination, they warrant an inquiry with relational sociology.

Relational sociology is particularly useful in reading Yunis' *The Night Counter*; nevertheless, this approach is also limited or even inapplicable in other cases, chiefly in Rabih Alameddine's *The Hakawati*. As the term "relational sociology" already indicates, it only applies to relations, and relations in literature usually appear in form of interaction. Thus, this approach is not useful when, as in Alameddine's novel, interaction between Arabs and non-Arabs is nearly non-existent; the same holds true for a part of Abu-Jaber's *Crescent*. Furthermore, relational sociology by nature offers no insight into literary aesthetics;

no different in cases where the two groups [...] are physically indistinguishable, so that the low-powered outsiders have to wear a badge to show their identity. It seems that terms like 'racial' or 'ethnic' [...] are symptomatic of an ideological avoidance action [...] one singles out for attention what is peripheral to these relationships [...] and turns the eye away from what is central" (*Established and Outsiders*, xxx).

consequently, I will combine and alternate this approach with traditional narratology, a term and instrument I use with Mieke Bal.[52] Since some of the novels operate with oral tradition and partially mimic orality of the Arab tradition, classical Western theories fail as interpretation tools, being inapplicable to Middle Eastern oral tradition. In order to understand this tradition and its scriptural transmission in the novels, their intertextual dimension, it is most appropriate to do a close reading of the text with narratology.

It is no coincidence that my analysis will treat three female writers and only one male writer; while I did not choose according to gender, the current market does. As can be seen in the writers mentioned so far, most of Arab American literature from the nineties until today is published by women, which Nada Elia explains as resulting of a long American tradition favoring Arab women over men because they are seen as harmless victims of their culture, while their brothers and husbands are viewed as the aggressive, terrorist threat.[53] To substantiate her claim of a long-standing habit, Elia offers an example from 1980, when

> Edward Said was told that Arabic is a "controversial language," when he suggested to a New York publisher promoting "third world literature" that Egyptian novelist Naguib Mahfouz's books be translated into English (Said 2001). This was in 1980, at the time when novels by Mahfouz's compatriot, the feminist Nawal Saadawi – who also wrote in Arabic – were lining the shelves of American bookstores. In her case, the language was not considered "controversial" probably because some of the topics she discussed, clitoridectomy and Arab women's sexuality, were too titillating to pass. Today there is a disproportionate ratio of Arab women to men writers available in libraries and bookstores, and assigned in various book groups and course syllabi. (158)

Thus, the gender proportion in my analysis is due to the market's restriction.

[52] Bal, Mieke. *Narratology. Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*. 2nd edition, Toronto, University of Toronto Press (1994).

[53] Elia, Nada. "Islamophobia and the 'Privileging' of Arab American Women." *NWSA Journal*. 18:3 (2006), 155-161. 158.

As each novel is unique and has its own themes and motifs, I will examine each on its own, then compare all four in a final conclusion; each novel's chapter will begin with a short summary of the novel's plot and end on a conclusion to the novel's analysis.

Chapter two will treat Rabih Alameddine's *The Hakawati*, a novel incorporating many plotlines. I will show how Alameddine recurs to the arabesque as a unifying motif throughout all levels of the novel. The chapter will discuss the use of the arabesque for character elucidation, emotions, and treatment of taboo subjects of Arab culture(s) such as religious criticism and homosexuality. As Alameddine uses the character arabesque for women, the chapter will study the female image of *The Hakawati;* I argue that it contests stereotypes of Arab women. Seeing that the novel ponders the uses of storytelling, the chapter will also study the novel's metafictional comments on storytelling; it will also analyze how Alameddine uses music to negotiate identity. I will demonstrate how Alameddine employs music to illustrate his protagonist's journey from Arab patriotism to disenchantment and Americanization, until he finally comes to terms with his Lebanese identity. In this context, the chapter will also discuss Alameddine's depiction of Lebanese outsiders with figurational sociology.

Chapter three deals with Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent*; I will explain how the fable told by the protagonist's uncle, entwined with the main narrative, embodies and exemplifies traditional Arab storytelling as well as the storytelling principles of the novel itself. I will then show how Abu-Jaber uses shifting identities and misleading assumptions in the fable to question fixed concepts of identity and culture, in order to dismantle Orientalism and clichéd stereotypes, wherein she also problematizes the term *Arab* and unmasks its essential emptiness.

In examining Abu-Jaber's depiction of Arabs in the SA, I will demonstrate with relational sociology how Abu-Jaber presents symbolic power and the devastating consequences of stigmatization on Arab outsiders. Furthermore, I will argue that Abu-Jaber's novel is a case in point for the claim that anti-Arab discrimination experienced a sharp rise already before 9/11; I will also maintain that Abu-Jaber presents a fairly isolated Arab American community, whose limited contact to non-Arab Americans confirms their outsidership.