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**SURVIVING IN BETWEEN WORLDS OF LAILA
HALABY'S WEST OF THE JORDAN**

*To survive the Borderlands,
you must live sin fronteras
be a crossroad. (195).*

*- Gloria Anzaldúa in
To Live in the Borderlands (poem)*

*The older people all act the same way
as they did when they were home,
which is not fair in a lot of ways.
Because we are in America now,
but they tell us that we are not
supposed to be living an American life. (31)*

*- Laila Halaby in
West of the Jordan*

Abstract: *West of the Jordan* was published in 2003, a period when the Arab American movement was coming to a new era in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. It was a time when scholars/writers began deconstructing the concept of Arab and Arab American identity to highlight the diversity of the community by taking into account internal differences, especially in areas such as gender, class, and sexuality. I intend to add to this body of work by setting *West of the Jordan* against Gloria Anzaldúa's theoretical concept of nepantla (Borderlands; In-betweenness), seen here as an identity formation framework. Anzaldúa's theorization of nepantla has stressed the instability of identity categories through movement betwixt and between identity and transformative ethics of change. Thus, the novel's formulations and reformulations of ethnic, gender, and other categories should be understood as a way of criticizing these categories' essentialist nature (even if some of the characters in the novel fail to formulate a constructive liberatory alternative to the essentialisms it attacks/aims to eradicate). In this context, the heroines' actions succeed in destabilizing the categories' ideological power and manage to show the shallowness of such delineations.

Key words: Arab American women, Laila Halaby, nepantla, displacement, identity construction

Theoretical Background: Nepantla / In-Betweenness

Anzaldúa (1987) envisions nepantla as more than a physical space; it is beyond our body and mind. She sees it as a “midway point” between consciousness and unconsciousness – an area where we can accept contradiction and paradox (56). Nepantla is also a “psychological, liminal space between the way things had been and an unknown future” (Anzaldúa, 1987: 17). It is described as a place of transformation because it is where two or more forces collide, “where you question the basic ideas, tenets, and identities inherited from your family, your education, and your different cultures” (Anzaldúa, 1987: 56). These forces are in turmoil, balancing unsteadily between order and chaos. Furthermore, Anzaldúa (1987) writes that nepantla is “entreguerras,” or “internal wars.” It is the place where we detach from and attach to our various cultures (56).

Nepantla is described as a willingness to enter this in-between state, emphasizing the creative performance of reconstructed identities. In terms of identity, Anzaldúa and Keating (2000) explain that nepantla is “a birthing stage where an individual is reworking and reconfiguring identity,” a stage where “you are changing worlds and cultures and maybe classes, sexual preferences” (225–226). In this stage of nepantla, Anzaldúa and Keating (2000) emphasize the importance of challenging one’s own identity formations and the impact of other forces and discourses on these formations – whether they are racial, ethnic, cultural, ideological, political, historical, sexual, social, or geographic (166). Thus, the theory of nepantla problematizes various aspects of identities. Coming to terms with different aspects of our subjectivity/subjectivities is a continuous struggle and a fundamental part of the nepantla process. In the course of nepantla, “boundaries become more permeable and begin breaking down. This loosening of previously restrictive labels, while intensely painful, can create shifts in consciousness and transgressive opportunities for change.” (Anzaldúa, 2015: xxxv). Anzaldúa (2015) calls people who inhabit this state of being “Nepantleras” and describes them as “threshold people, those who move within and among multiple worlds and use their movement in the service of transformation.” These are people whose self-definition and belief systems are destabilized as they begin questioning their previously accepted worldviews (their epistemologies, ontologies, and/or ethics) (xxxv). Consequently, they invent holistic, relational theories and tactics which enable them to reconceive or, in other ways, transform the various worlds in which they exist (Anzaldúa, 2015). What is more, Nepantleras hold beliefs, ways of knowing, and ideas that are in tension with one another; these tensions provide them with the ability to see and inhabit multiple realities. It is not easy to be a Nepantlera. As argued by Anzaldúa (2015), “it is risky, lonely, exhausting work” (xxxvi). Never entirely inside, always somewhat outside every group or belief system, “Nepantleras do

not fully belong to any single location” (xxxv). However, their willingness to remain with/in the thresholds enables them to partially break away from the binary thinking that locks us into the status quo (our status quo stories).

Though nepantla as a process is available for everyone to undergo, it is particularly relevant when considering Arab American women’s experiences. The intersectional aspects of their identities, including their gender and race, as well as their sexuality and class, lead them to live within and in between various categories and be influenced by different discourses. Arab American women also encounter several contradictions/challenges complicated by elements of geography, politics, and history that unite or divide their experiences. They negotiate through a hegemonic society and a conservative, traditional community where any deviation from the norms renders them vulnerable to oppression by the patriarchal public. As Anzaldúa and Keating (2002) describe it, this negotiation/navigating the cracks between worlds is difficult and painful, like reconstructing a new life, a new identity. However, as they argue, being “forced to negotiate the cracks between realities, we learn to navigate the switchback roads between assimilation/acquiescence to the dominant culture and isolation/preservation of our ethnic, cultural integrity. Both are necessary for survival and growth. When we adapt to cambio (change), we develop a new set of terms to identify with, new definitions of our identities” (79).

Placing Laila Halaby: Biographical Context

Being from two worlds means you are given two sets of eyes with which to view the world ... It has given me the tools to step out of myself and be able to see situations more clearly - and not just as they relate to culture.

*- Laila Halaby in
Author Spotlight¹*

Laila Halaby was born in 1966 in Lebanon to a Jordanian father and an American mother. For the most part, she grew up in Tucson, Arizona; however, she has traveled widely in the Middle East and has lived on the American East and West Coast, in the Midwest, Jordan, and Italy. She currently works as an Outreach Counselor for the University of Arizona’s College of Public Health. As a writer, Halaby is conscious that she occupies an ambiguous, transnational space. A life spent living on three continents (Asia/Europe/North America) and

¹ Syracuse University Press website. (2012) Author Spotlight: Laila Halaby. Available from: <https://bit.ly/35L0aDL>. [Accessed 20th March 2021].

time dedicated to different vocations (teacher/writer/counselor) have left her adept at looking *at* and *through* cultures. Her experiences of moving within, between, and among multiple worlds inform her perspectives, shape her works, and influence the stories she invents. One can observe that, for example, in her strong critiques of rigid identity categories and identitarian dichotomy.

In her writings, Halaby undermines the predetermined notions of what constitutes Arab American identity/ies; she also tries to create her own versions of individual and collective Arab American subjectivity/ies. This tendency is especially clear in her novels *West of the Jordan* (2003) and *Once in a Promised Land* (2008), as well as her poetry collection *My Name on His Tongue* (2012). In an interview posted by American Writers Museum (2020), Halaby describes her liminal status: “My father always lived in Jordan, my mother always lived in the States, so I’ve never felt like I’m Arab-American. I feel like I’m Arab, and I feel like I’m American, but the hyphen is lost on me. Even though I feel like the hyphen is also where I live, you know? It is funny.”

Growing up in these multiple cultural spaces/communities, Halaby was conscious that she would not fit in entirely with either the Arab or the American world in their most stereotypical sense. Therefore, like many people with mixed backgrounds, Halaby “did the pendulum.” As she explains:

I tried out being totally American; I tried out being totally Arab, and then ultimately, I ended up in between. And there is a sense . . . so, I look at it like I have access to lots of worlds, and that is amazing, and it does not matter if I fit . . . much of my writing has to do with translating one world, one situation, for the other so that each can understand it (American Writers Museum, 2020).

Halaby embraces her bi-cultural heritage, perceiving her parentage’s dual perspectives as a source of enrichment that drew her closer to other cultures. This “double consciousness” – a term coined by African American intellectual W. E. B. Du Bois – leads Halaby more and more to address issues pertaining to her own experiences as an author writing from this liminal/in-between cultures/worlds. Hence, like the work of many Arab American writers, Halaby’s literary explorations have resulted in texts that provide alternative ways of thinking that challenge the essentialist conceptions of identities, race, class, and gender. As argued by Anzaldúa and Keating (2002), today’s authors are able to “change notions of identity, viewing it as a part of a more complex system covering a larger terrain, and demonstrating that the politics of exclusion based on traditional categories diminishes our humanness” (4). Like them, Halaby believes that a rigid application of identity categories and signs can be misleading for individuals and communities alike, while in “in-betweenness” exists a conglomerate of identities that allows one to reimagine their sense of self.

West of the Jordan: Documenting the Histories of Four Arab and Arab American Females

Halaby's *West of the Jordan*, a winner of a P.E.N./Beyond Margins Award, got a lot of attention from reviewers as a novel by an Arab American that contributed to the emerging literature that sought to challenge the stereotype of women from the Arab world. In addition, Halaby's fiction attempted to present Western readers with insights into Arab American life/lives. Halaby explicitly addresses this point on her website:

I have always believed that if other people could see my world, could see a Palestinian, Arab, or Muslim family/person/story, from the inside, then they could not have such ridiculous and negative stereotypes. I think over the years; I have really come to appreciate the role of artists more, the role that translation plays in art. I do not have an agenda as a writer, but I do believe that it is my responsibility to offer an honest and challenging story. ("About")

Halaby's interpretation of the "role of artists" in "translat[ing]" foreign experiences gives the American reader the power to see, recognize, and possibly accept the stories of Arab and Muslim others in the United States. Furthermore, her approach to writing is based on a perception of the authors' "responsibility to offer an honest and challenging story" ("About").

West of the Jordan revolves around three main female characters of the second generation of Arab Americans: Hala, Khadija, and Soraya (as well as their cousin, Mawal, who still lives in the family's ancestral town of Nawara on the West Bank, in the occupied Palestinian territories, and who has never been to the United States). Structure-wise, the novel presents four series of plots, and they contain several episodes narrated respectively by each character. To highlight her female characters' importance, Halaby makes each of the four girls the protagonist of her own story. Every story is given a concept-based title; it helps the reader understand how each protagonist perceives a given idea and how it shapes their character. The storytelling attempts to investigate the challenges encountered by second-generation Arab people (especially females) – whose parents are defined as foreigners, immigrants, and others. Although the characters share the same cultural background, their experiences are entirely different, exemplifying the writer's tendency to defy the mainstream American representation of Arab and Arab American women as homogeneous. As Salaita (2007) aptly puts it, the girls in *West of the Jordan* share "the same cultural origin and belong to the same extended family, [but] each is vastly different from the other three in disposition and personal circumstance" (132). The female protagonists do not narrate their experiences from a static position that can be easily categorized; they occupy a conceptual space in-between multiple categories.

Their experiences show how the intersections of ethnicity, gender, class, and religion implicate the lives of Arab women, whether in America, Jordan, or Palestine.

The identity question looms over the stories of the four young women. Along their journey towards self-awareness, they challenge and shed essentialist assumptions and assert their identities from within the “borderlanded/nepantla” space – a mental space of possibilities and healing – from which they re/tell their stories of survival. As a detailed exploration of all female subjects of this novel is far beyond the scope of a single article, this essay focuses on one character, namely, Soraya. Halaby’s aim was to represent each of her female protagonists in a thorough, exhaustive manner – given the constraints of space, focusing on one character allows me to mirror her approach in my critical reading. What is more, out of the four main characters in the novel, Soraya is most representative of the concept of nepantla.

Soraya: Navigating Nepantla

Soraya was born in Palestine and moved to the United States with her parents when she was very young. She has lived in the United States almost her entire life; however, she regularly visited her relatives in Nawara, a village in the occupied West Bank. Soraya’s rebellious personality is revealed at the very beginning of her narrative when she states: “I have fire [within me].” Affirming her confidence and strength, she adds: “everybody knows it. They see it in my beautiful brown exotic eyes that I paint full of Maybelline kohl to turn my tears black” (24). Meanwhile, Soraya’s Palestinian mother thinks that Soraya “ate too much cereal when she was young; that is why she has the foolishness of an American in her blood” (19). Being described as an American marks the central conflict between Soraya and her community, especially her mother. The mother keeps telling Soraya that she is disappointed with her because she has a weak spirit, one which has been “taken in by the lie that is America: freedom, freedom, freedom” (24–25).

Soraya is defined as the opposite of Mawal, the good Arab girl, and her sister, who, unlike Soraya, seems to match the mother’s expectations. Describing the kind of a relationship she has with her mother, Soraya states:

My sister and cousins are the way my mother wishes I were, and she is always comparing us and telling me what good girls they are and how I am just a headache. “*You are like labor that never ends*” . . . She can’t accept that my way of being different is just as good as everyone else’s way of being the same. I like to enjoy myself, unlike my sister Pauline who, despite her American name, is very conservative and believes that all answers lie in God’s words and that suffering is good . . . Mawal, who lives in Nawara, would be my mother’s version of perfect if she weren’t so fat. (25, emphasis added)

As described above, Soraya is neither conservative nor religious; she does not care about what her mother thinks of her because she likes to enjoy herself. In this way, she distances herself from the other female members of her family and community, as well as provokes criticism and rejection of her behavior by her mother. As a somewhat tragic figure, Soraya's mother is the carer as well as the chastiser. She is a constant reminder of her ancestry and the importance of virginity as a representation of racial identity. Soraya expresses this reduction of female identity when echoing her mother's words, "*You are nothing without your virginity*" (190, emphasis added). The mother holds a strong essentialist view, i.e., she believes that there is an authentic cultural identity – a "pure" Arab cultural identity – that her daughter must maintain forever. Moreover, she is entirely trapped in her anti-Americanization mentality. She refuses to acknowledge the fact that her daughter is growing into American culture and adamantly stands by the Arab ways of thinking and conceptualizing the world. In fact, the mother's attitude can be read as a commentary on the constructedness of the Arab notion of femininity and its possible burden on the lives of Arab American females in the U.S.

Soraya is frustrated with the possessive and dominating plans of her mother: "I know she cannot wait until next year is over and I am done with high school so she can marry me off and concentrate on the things that matter to her," declares Soraya (24–25). The mother and the Arab community, in general, expect Soraya to comply with the traditionalist standards and reject all forms of modernization and Americanization. Cultural critic Cankar (2009) argues that most Arab mothers in the United States believe that specific values considered traditional in Western society form the backbone of Arab culture and therefore deserve the highest respect. These include the primacy of the extended family, collective responsibility for kin, hospitality, respect for superiors' social status, and the rigid communal control of women's sexuality. These views are focalized through Soraya's stories, who keeps venting her rage against this confining/restricting mentality: "the older people," she explains, "all act the same way they did when they were home, which isn't fair in a lot of ways because we're in America now, but they tell us that we are not supposed to be living an American life" (31). Indeed, it is not fair to ignore our interdependence with the world that surrounds us, disregard the fact that one lives in intricate relationships with others, and deny that our very existence depends on the interactions with all life forms around us. By pointing that out, *West of the Jordan* can be understood as a warning against the dangers of constructing fixed visions of identity in the diasporic multi-ethnic context; the novel is particularly standing against the expectations of strong traditionalist conviction and certainty from individuals in relation to their presumed cultural allegiances.

Soraya's life is further complicated by her experiences with American friends at school and the wider American society. In addition to her initial frustration

regarding her identity, one that arises from her mother's cultural enforcements, Soraya's socio-cultural interactions at school prove damaging as well. For example, her schoolmates keep referring to her as the 'other': "an Arabian . . . In her country, 'her schoolmates say, "they don't have furniture or dishwashers, only oil" (24). These degrading stereotypes and cultural distortions of Arabs that have long been established in the consciousness of many Americans and Westerners are of destructive impact on the formation of Soraya's identity.

Suleiman (1999) discussed the prevailing, negative notions of Arabs and Muslims in the United States, explaining that at times, the images of "poverty, filth, the desert, sheikhs, and harems are emphasized; at others, the view changes and the desert gushes with oil, the sheikhs are wealthy beyond belief, their 'spot' is to destabilize western economies and ruin the world in order to master it" (1). He further argues that Arabs throughout their history in America have had to fight with their ancestral identity, "especially as they encounter bias and discrimination" (Suleiman, 1999: 11). Stereotyping discourse discussed by Suleiman excludes the individual from the particularities of history, location, and time, perpetuating all forms of essentialism and typecasting heterogeneous ethnicities. The meaning of the Arab culture/identity itself is already constructed in the mainstream hegemonic knowledge, which keeps providing its followers with representative images each time the words "Arab" and/or "Arab woman" are uttered. It is a "dominant regime of representation," as Hall (1990) stated, which keeps assigning various essentialist traits to people perceived as representatives of a specific cultural identity. Hall utilizes Michel Foucault's "power/knowledge" paradigm to refer to a hegemonic discourse within and between cultures that determines what represents a given culture and which features are assigned to its public image.

Through a string of relationships and personal events, Soraya learns that she will always be the "other" for the outside world. Her being American is linked with her ethnic heritage and, for the characters she interacts with, it becomes a point of difference and exclusion from their respective groups. Thus, she is simply an outsider for her friends at school, the people in the streets or the bar. Her status as an American is a matter of widespread doubt. Whether they live like a "typical", WASPY Americans or not, the U.S. mainstream still catalogs individuals like Soraya as others. In a chapter entitled '*Visas*', Soraya narrates the incident she and her friend Walid have been through at a bar with a group of white men. After a while spent inside, talking, a group of white male customers approach them and start shouting: "Speak English! You Bastards". Walid's answer is simple "we speak what we please." This response enrages the men even more, so they insult them, calling them: "Fucking Mexicans" (58). Walid and Soraya decide to leave to avoid any further troubles; however, the men continue yelling: "You speak English pretty good for a wetback. Just remember,

this ain't a Mexican joint. You go somewhere else to drink your *cervezas* and hang out with your *puta*" (59). The men's resentment and their offensive, racist comments show their belief that Soraya and Walid have disrupted the "whiteness" of "The Jack Knife" bar with its "white name, white customers, white neighborhood" (58). Although Soraya and Walid speak English pretty well, the white men mocked them for their ethnicity and located them both outside the nation's cultural boundaries (although they have obviously misidentified their ancestral backgrounds and blended them into an idea of "foreignness" they find themselves aggressively hostile to).

Enraged by this enforced dis-identification from the nation-state and the national belonging, from their Americanness, Soraya shouts back at the men: "We are not Mexicans! . . . We are Americans." (59). Soraya's deliberate, firm and defiant reaction provokes the white men more; therefore, they act violently to maintain the "purity" of American identity from those "strangers." They abuse and attack them, leaving Walid lying on the floor, injured and humiliated. One of Halaby's intentions in portraying this incident is to make reference to the invisibility of the Arab American community as a whole. Kadi (1994) considers Arab Americans as "the Most Invisible of the Invisibles" (xix); she explains that she has coined this phrase to describe the Arab community because "it is not only white people who refuse to see us but also other people of color – Latinos, Africans, Asians, Natives – who do not acknowledge our existence" (xx). However, the 9/11 attacks had irrevocably transformed the Arab status from that of an invisible minority into a hyper-visible suspect of terrorism. After the fall of the Twin Towers, the blame and straightforward anger/violence intensified against all Arabs and Muslims, regardless of their country of origin or identification with American values.

Later, when the policewoman arrives to investigate the aforementioned assault at the bar, the following conversation takes place:

"So they beat you up for being Mexican?" the policewoman asked.

"We're not Mexican."

"You got beaten up for being Mexican, and you're not Mexican? What are you?"

"Palestinian."

"Well, you got off pretty lucky then." The policewoman was quiet for a minute.

"That jacket sure makes you look Mexican." (59-60, emphasis added)

What frustrates Soraya the most is the policewoman's suggestion that being an Arab is even worse than being Mexican and that the situation would have been much more drastic if the white men had known their real ethnic background. While the white men's insults and attacks on Walid and Soraya show the indeterminate nature of racial identities – i.e., Arabs are often conflated with Mexicans and Italians because of their physical features and skin color – the

policewoman's comment indicates that when visible, Arabs are not only devalued and are not welcome in the white cultural circle, but are also vulnerable to excessive hostility, verbal abuse, and physical violence.

From this crucial moment onwards, Soraya starts to consider what her racial identity really means to her personally as she bitterly demonstrates the painful and damaging effects of stereotypes:

Sneak back home, heart-pounding hours later, with rage, with hate... squeezing tears out, wishing that it was one of those American movies where Walid would knock those guys to the floor, and we would walk off without a scratch, my heroic prince defending my honor . . . *but that is not what the American movie would show*, would it? Instead, it would show the super American guy knocking the scummy Arab flat on the ground like what happened. Still wishing . . . that I were a superhero like in those cartoons where she comes in and wipes out the bad guys and still looks great. *But there aren't any Arab ones*, are there? My hair is too dark, too thick; my skin is too far away from white to let me even pretend to be an American superhero. (60, emphasis added)

As Soraya's words have pointed out, her features fail her on the level of the aesthetic standards of Americanness. "Pure" American identity is limited to whiteness, whereas her physical appearance is too far from white to let her engage in racial passing –i.e., pretending to be a "typical" white American. Significantly, one's skin/appearance often signals a difference from the ethnic or racial 'norms' of one's environment. Soraya's hair (too thick) and skin (too dark) are some of the indicators of her difference/foreignness/Arabness, which is a threat to American whiteness. It constitutes a factor that excludes her from the American identity and will always keep reminding her of her foreignness.

Soraya's reimagining of the incident at the bar is highly relevant to the discussion on racist stereotypes, as it reveals the impacts of the discriminatory discourse of the American movies on the girl's psyche. For a moment, Soraya reorganizes the whole scene in her mind, wishing that Walid had been a superhero who could save her from the attackers. However, she bitterly realizes that this is not the image of an Arab man in American cinema. Instead, Arabs are mainly represented as weak, backward villains and terrorists, characters to be knocked out and defeated. Soraya ruefully recognizes that she cannot imagine herself as a superhero because there is no such kind of depiction of Arab women either. Instead, movies/Hollywood represents Arab women and Arab American women as submissive and oppressed (it is worth pointing out that since the publication of *West of the Jordan* in 2003, a Muslim/Middle-Eastern American superhero, Kamala Khan, a.k.a. Ms. Marvel, emerged in the hugely successful comic books by G. Willow Wilson; she is to be introduced to the silver screen in the Marvel Cinematic Universe Disney+ television series *Ms. Marvel* in 2021, and the feature film *The Marvels* in 2022) (Dinh, 2020).

Cultural critic Shaheen (2000) summarizes the stereotypical and hyperbolic images of Arabs in Western motion pictures. After studying over 800 American films, he states:

For more than a century, movies have dramatized myth-making. Ever since the camera began to crank, the unkempt Arab has appeared as an uncivilized character, the cultural Other, someone who appears and acts differently than the white Western protagonist, someone of a different race, class, gender, or national origin. The diverse Arabic world is populated solely with bearded mullahs, shady sheikhs in their harems, bombers, backward Bedouins, belly dancers, harem maidens, and obsequious domestics. Image makers cover women in black from head to toe and have them follow several paces behind abusive sheikhs, their heads lowered, as mute, uneducated, unattractive, enslaved beings, solely attending men. They have no identities whatsoever. (23-24)

Samhan (1987) believes that the racialization of Arab Americans, unlike the racialization of other American minorities, “has its roots in politics rather than the traditional motives of racial hierarchy” (11). According to him, this “political racism” results from “the Arab-Israeli conflict and is encouraged by pro-Israeli organizations and individuals with the political motive of monopolizing the discussion of the Middle East in the U.S., particularly in the realm of public information and public policy” (12). This difference in racialization promotes the perception of Arab Americans as the foreign “other” and eventually leads the media to stereotype Arabs and Arab Americans, whom Edward Said calls the last ethnic and/or national group that can be represented in caricature form with impunity, i.e., without widespread mainstream ostracism and/or severe reputational cost (Said and Viswanathan, 2001). Being aware of such a reality, Soraya feels alienated and utterly alone. She realizes that she will never be recognized as an individual, let alone as an American, and that she will constantly be pushed to the margins, othered, and subjected to racism in a country where race continues to matter and where it is not entirely safe to be an Arab. The novel here adopts a confrontational, non-apologetic strategy that exposes the difficulty faced by minorities in an ethnically and culturally diverse community of the U.S., where labeling, dismissal, and racism still run deep and permeate the society on an individual and systemic level.

Recounting the racist incident, Soraya explains that she never before had felt so lost and displaced: “*Lost in somewhere you grew up in, with a language you have taken, with a world that you want, but which is behind that clear steel curtain. Watch it. Watch it all you want, but it will never be yours*” (189, emphasis added). Although she has grown up in America, the racism and the lack of acceptance of her ethnic difference stand as a barrier; a ‘steel curtain’ that denies her access/does not permit her to cross to the American side of her identity.

Contemplating her positioning as racial and cultural other in the mainstream American society, Soraya knows that her other option is to identify with the Arab

side of the self; nonetheless, she does not want the fate awaiting her at that side of the cultural binary. She knows about her family's intention to marry her off soon, as well as about all of the restrictions that will continue to be imposed on her:

One year away for me is a wedding, and then one little baby after another ... I do not want a husband who walks under clouds; that is not my freedom. How can God mean this for anyone, a struggle that can never be won, a debt that can never be repaid? I sit silently and wait and pretend it does not exist, pretend there is no after-anything, that all there is, is now and I have to eat it up, devour what I can because there is no take-out service here. (190)

Obviously, the family's "great expectations" of their daughter do not correspond with the kind of life Soraya is anticipating; they will not grant her the freedom she is seeking for herself. Therefore, as the previous quotation shows, the frustrations, fears, and puzzlement prevail as she thinks about her future, dreams, and identity. Bhabha (1994) coins the term "unhomeliness" for this feeling of ambivalence and struggle between two cultures, an emotion familiar to colonized persons worldwide. The sense of estrangement from both cultures tends to push the (colonized) person to become a psychological refugee. It may be argued that Soraya's situation in the United States is not exactly "Colonial." Nevertheless, it is inescapable that what Soraya is going through echoes Bhabha's definition of "unhomeliness." Her status of being an Arab/American female in the U.S. offers her little in the way of reassurance, imposes its burdens on the girl's psyche, and renders her vulnerable to both literal and psychological displacement.

There is a two-tier displacement experience in *West of the Jordan*; each adds to the novel's theme. As Soraya understands that her identity is neither entirely Arab nor fully American, she starts an adaptable, dynamic process through which she can mediate a position in between these conflicting cultures. Anzaldúa and Keating (2000) believe that the too-literal application of identity categories and signs can be misleading for individuals and communities alike, while "in-betweenness" engenders a complexity of identities that allows one to reimagine the self. Likewise, Halaby's narrative shows Soraya defying the misleading and destructive binaries of us/them, as well as binary definitions of gender, race, and sexuality. As she declares, "I am sick of everything being *haram* or *halal*, but nothing in between. *I am in between.*" (117, emphasis in original). In Arabic, *haram* is the word that represents everything that is forbidden, evil, immoral, or unlawful, while *halal* means all that is legal and permissive. The emphasis presented by the italicized words epitomizes Soraya's struggle; her sense of self, navigating between the binaries of either "halal," which is allowed in culture, religion, and traditions, or "haram," which is forbidden. Soraya knows that she cannot tolerate being labeled exclusively either Arab or American and reimagines herself as a "*new breed*" (56, emphasis added).

Soraya's hatred of categorization marks her, to use Anzaldúa's term, a "nepantlera"; a "person who breaks away from the cultural trance and binary thinking that locks one into the status quo" (Anzaldúa, 2015: xxxvi). Living within and among multiple worlds, the nepantlera, as Anzaldúa (2015) stresses, uses his/her liminal perspectives to question consensual reality and develop alternative perspectives—ideas, theories, actions, and beliefs that reflect and exceed existing worldviews" (xxxvi). Anzaldúa (2015) further argues that the nepantlera invent relational theories and tactics with which he/she can reconceive and, in other ways, transform the various worlds in which they exist.

Soraya's tactics vary, facilitating her breaking away from and transforming the limiting worlds she finds herself inhabiting. First of all, she adopts an extreme approach in which she leads a promiscuous life that ends up in an incestuous relationship with her uncle. In her book, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa (1987) argues that "sexual behavior" is the "ultimate rebellion [a nepantlera] can make against her native/ethnic culture" (41). Thus, Soraya utilizes her sexuality to rebel against the prohibitions inherent in her Arab heritage, transcends the ethnic and traditional categories that are so prevalent in the community, and rejects the stereotypes permeating mainstream Western culture, which depicts Arab/Arab American women as sexually oppressed. In her narration, Soraya connects her in-betweenness with sexuality. "I am a rebel," she states, "My mother and her sisters can spill a story from any woman, but I can make a man talk. *I am in between*. Familiar ears. Safe mouth. I have men as friends, as well as lovers" (56). Soraya embraces and celebrates her sexuality and body, defying all the taboos that her native culture imposes on the female body. Anzaldúa (1987) describes this struggle in the 'in-between' female life as a "body awareness" (48). In this context, Soraya explains: "My body is like some of those women [in porn videos]. I have a skinny girl's waist with woman hips and large breasts; I know my body is sexy; I can tell by the way men look at me, by the way men have always looked at me" (30).

Secondly, Soraya problematizes cultural differences in terms of clothes. In other words, she keeps changing ethnic attires to facilitate her in-between adjustment. Thus, the apparel here becomes a representation of her changing consciousness: "I go to school early so I can change out of my loose pants and elbow-length shirts into tighter clothes," states Soraya (30). By wearing loose clothes, she follows the Arab cultural practices, and by changing them to tighter clothes, she adamantly does things deemed "normal" by American teenagers. Thus, by choosing to wear, remove, and replace clothes, Soraya becomes a being of both ethnicities and none, furthering the creation of an identity defined by in-betweenness and movement.

Nepantla consciousness is also explained as a performance, a willful creation, and this choice to enter the in-between space is central for Soraya. Based on the borderlands experience, the decision to enter in-between existing identification

categories to create a new identity is an act of survival. In this sense, Anzaldúa (1987) explains: “What I want is an accounting with all three cultures –white, Mexican, Indian. I want the freedom to carve and chisel my own face, to staunch the bleeding with ashes, to fashion my own gods out of my entrails. And if going home is denied, then I will have to stand and claim my space, making new culture, with my own lumber, my own bricks and mortar, and my own feminist architecture” (44). When the validation of her position as an American becomes out of reach and her conflicts with her Arab heritage persist, Soraya stands and claims her own position, declaring that she “chooses what she does. She has always chosen what she does/wants” (190). Ultimately, *West of the Jordan* rewrites Soraya’s position as an otherized, confused, frustrated, and lost woman in the United States. The novel allows her to adopt and epitomize the role of nepantla by actively stepping out of ethnic and cultural categorizations.

Conclusion

As an influential voice of Arab American female writers who struggle to resist the discourses of binarism, racism, and exclusion, Halaby presents a heterogeneous experience of Arab American women situated between various forces of race and gender, both affected by the Western hegemonic discourses of patriarchy, ethnicity, and nationality. Utilizing Anzaldúa’s theory of nepantla helps to question the problematic nature of essentialist, binary identity construction in such contexts. Described as an unstable, unpredictable, precarious, always-in-transition space that lacks clear boundaries and is characterized by movement or a constant state of displacement, nepantla has been framed as a method by which individuals can adjust/change their destabilized personal and social position(s).

The theoretical framework of nepantla lays bare the ways in which the in-between identity/ies are described and created in *West of the Jordan*. In Halaby’s novel, ethnic and cultural in-betweenness is an essential theme that accentuates Soraya’s position in relation to the Arab community and the wider American society. Applying nepantla to the reading of the novel calls attention to the multiplicity of ethnic and racial categories that one individual can be influenced and formed by (while not feeling wholly part of any of them). Throughout the novel, it is apparent that Soraya is creating this in-between space as well as describing her perceived reality as a nepantlera; a position which signifies that the meaning of identity is not definitive (if even definable), but rather subject to change and ongoing revision, dismantling and/or creation. In the end, she identifies herself as an “in-between” being – a “*new breed*,” sidestepping the limiting racial and ethnic categorizations and thus calling attention to the overall instability of binary definitions of race and identity. Illustrating the struggles of Soraya, Halaby

lays intellectual and artistic foundations for new types of cultural identifications – conceptualization of self and the world that will hopefully make the society/ies more aware of the existing multiplicity and could benefit the Western and Arab world alike.

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