Original Research Article

"West of Jordan"*:* Gender Exile and Self-Identification in the Writing of Layla Halaby

Abstract

The main purpose of this article is examining the association between individual and collective identities in the current Palestinian women literature in America. By addressing the themes the writerLaila Halaby, one of the prominent current Palestinian American writers, uses in *West of Jordan* (2003*)*, a case study novel, I will examine how the writerassociates between female individuality and collective identity. In this article, I will discuss how Halaby handles the question of association between self-identification and collective identity. This article shows how Halaby's narrative proves that neither *Palestiniancollective identity (*to reconcile the split vision of the self by reconstructing collective identity), nor a state of *betweenness* (theorizing a mediate state of being) are relevant to the reality of the Palestinian women in America, and female individual identity maintenance. This article shows that *Individual Identity (*its main concern is selfhood and individual promotion) is the most appropriate pattern of identity to maintain selfhood and self-esteem.

Key Words
Self-Identification Gender Exile Palestinian American Writers Collective identityIndividual Identity In-Betweenness

Introduction

After 1987, feeling of despair and helplessness generated by the first *Intifada* in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and the fundamental failure of the 1993 Oslo Accords to fulfill the Palestinian human rights,the cultural and economicrevival and progress (Rafeedy, 2017; Majaj,2001). This situation led Palestinian female writers to focus more on individuality and their self-esteem (Hammer, 2005).By expressing and situating their own experience in the center of their main concern, articulating their aims and premises as narratives, reflecting ideology in fictive spectrum, they endeavor and seek to establish and maintain individual identity.

Historical Review

Since the second World War, Palestinians' immigration to the United States has often been connected – directly or indirectly- with 1948 historical events and their implications. In the twenty years following this war, the newly arrived Palestinians were mostly educated and intellectuals.

At the beginning, although the American public policy and tendency were sympathetic to Israel, anti-Palestinian or Arab feeling in the country wasn't full of anger, as it would later become after 1967 war that embittered Palestinian Americans. To preserve their existence, the first generation of the Palestinian immigrants felt alienated, thus, they felt obliged to protect and sustain their

collective identity and community. Therefore, they used collective memory and histography to power the relations within their community. They have stressed the need to serve its interests, and to bound it to its historical events and contexts (Gillis, 1994, 3). Many Palestinians, especially during 1960s and 1970s started calling and referring to themselves as *Palestinians, "a* statement of solidarity " and collective identity(Shakir,1997). This notion of stressing collective identity powered their relations as a community (Howel, 2000).

The growing feeling of ethnic solidarity and collective nationality among Palestinian Americans has created an inner tension between their perception as Palestinians and Americans, especially in the last decade of the last century.

The Gulf War, the events of September 11th, the American- Afghanistan War, and the recent events of the middle East affected the way the Americans viewed and treated Palestinians in the United States, who began "to experience a heavy weight of representation" (Howell, 2000). Consequently, as a response to being misrepresented and misunderstood, they "asserted 'their ethnic identity that, in fact, kept this unresolved (Majaj, 1995). A sense of "doubleness, feeling torn between their parents' traditions and their own culture" (ibid) and alienation – neither completely Palestinians nor completely Americans- was notably emerged. They try to challenge this unstable state of self-identification by means of creating an "*imaginative Community*" (Anderson, 1994), that created only through the existence of information provided by members of the community with a feeling of being linked by the same information – as cultural roots.

The Quest of Self Identification

In general, Palestinian American literature perceive their Palestinian and American identities as two distinct sets of cultural, historical, experience and values. Reading a range of literary works written by contemporary Palestinian American writers shows that theauthors have handled the issue of individual and collective identity through three main patterns: *Collective cultural identity (*some writers try to reconcile the split vision of the self by reconstructing collective cultural memory)*,In Between State (*theorizing a mediate state of being)*, and Individual Identity (*its main concern is selfhood and individual promotion).

The Question of Identification in Halaby'sNovel: "West of Jordan"

The West of Jordan is a novel by Laila Halaby, an Arizona-based writer of Palestinian Jordanian writer. She was born in Beirut to a Palestinian father and an American mother[1].

[1]She grew up mostly in Arizona and traveled and lived for a certain time on the East and the West coasts, in the Midwest, and in Jordan and Italy. She has an undergraduate degree in Italian and Arabic and two master's degree in Arabic Literature and in Counseling. She has written two novels, *West of Jordan* (winner of the PEN/Beyond Margins Award), and *Once in the Promised Land* (a Barnes and Noble Discover Great New Authors selection; it was also named by the Washington Post as one of the 100 best works of fiction for 2007) and *My Name on His Tongue*.in her writing, Halaby focuses on a range of sociopolitical issues involving Arab American identity, civil liberties, racism, and xenophobia, and the effect of September 11, 2001 on America society.

West of Jordan discusses four young women, all first cousins, who narrate the novel: each young woman represents a different cultural, historical, and economic situation. Although each narrator's personality is distinct, all the women share the presence of Palestine as a crucial source of their identity.

In the case of Mawal, the collective identity pattern is used as a fundamental narrative element, by which Halaby shows how the character Mawal handles the issue of self-identification. Her narrative proposal is creating an *imaginative community (*Anderson, 1994) that represents her town of origin *Nawara*, the West Bank, from which the " Salama family hails- her ancestors [" I see (Uncle) Hamdi Salaami'], *Nowara* means " flowers or blossoms") in a deferent location " where she could have a smaller version of herself in the united States" (15). An imaginative community in an" Island" where it preserves its distinctive collective identity: " Everywhere is famous for : " Everywhere is famous for something: political activism, delicious vegetables, ugly women. Our village is an island, famous for beautiful embroidered dresses that we call *rozas,* and yet surrounded by villages that do not embroider at all" (15).

Thematically, this pattern of collective identity is distinguished by, among other characteristics, two prominent features: *orality* and *folk motifs*(Anderson, 1994). Orality, or the spoken quality of its language, gives the narrative of Mawal stories a sense of immediacy, of human presence, and the feeling of hearing a human voice. Told stories, commonly used phrases, and words Mawal uses in this spectrumare, implicitly and explicitly, narrative devices to protect her collective identity to ensure continuity. By employing different cultural themes and recalling indigenous "cultural roots", she generates a sense of being linked, indifferent, and cites sense of solidarity and traditional norms as a proof that the community preserve its cultural identity.

One of the major *folk motifs* Halaby addresses is her novel's main metaphor (one of the main stylistic features the writer employs), *Mawal*(*mawal means a folkloric sad song) and roza, an embroidered Palestinian dress,* to honor her ancestors and to remember her community's past. This cultural narrative pattern elaborates the interrelation of the novel's characters and stresses the collective identity. They also indicate the character's connection to Nawara. As 'threads' and 'strings',Mawal intends to strongly 'stitch' the characters of her story to the dress's -*roza*- (that symbolizes her imaginative community) "*fabric*". She reminds them of what the once were and what they were by employing the main novel's embroidering metaphor: [Stitch the red for life, Stitch the green to remember, Stitch, Stitch to never forget"] (103).

Mawal further tells socio historical stories within which she keens to use common words and phrases. The stories she tells "are stitched under the skin at birth" (206), as the story of Uncle Hayder who lives in "an American desert and stares at the sun because of the drugs he takes" (15), the story of Um Radwan, who "is grieving of being forgotten", the story of her two aunties Shahira and Maysoun who "went to the States with their husbands", to stress continuity and being linked. She also tells thestories told by three taxi passengers (she has heard these stories on her way to Jerusalem on her summer visit): the story of a Palestinian American man who tells about his children, and about hisPuertro Rican Americanex-wife who has refused to raise her children with Arabs:" I lived in Puertro Rico for fourteen years and it is incredible. I even had a Puertro Rican wife and three children by her, but one morning I woke up and felt I was lying in the Devil's bed, so I came back. I asked my wife to come with me but she refused. She asked me how I expected her to let my children grow up with *patróleo,* whichis what they call Arabs, as if we Palestinians have anything to do with oil. That's when I knew I had made the right decision to do with oil" (52). Now he is married to a young Palestinian woman; the story of Farah, a

young, divorced woman with four children, is returning to Jineen to live with her children (and, finally, the story of the young Palestinian American woman wholived in Puertro Rico goes back home, because she doesn't want to raise her children in a society where "girls are women at eleven years old and boys shoot real guns at each other at twelve?" (52).
Mawal alsotells the story of Umm Khalid, whose husband and two sons were killed in a car explosion, and who had an affair with the village butcher, Abu Jaafer. She also tells the story of Umm Radwan, whose son lives in Los Angeles, and her own story when she was young (the bike story her uncle brought her from U.S. and what happened to her friend Hanan when they rode it down the hill- they fell and Hanan was injured and lost her virginity. Her mother wrapped up her pants for her future husband. Hanan never got married). Then there is the story of Shahira (Khadija's mother) when she went back to Nawara to see her dying mother, and finally the story of a young Palestinian man who was chased by Israeli soldiers in Jerusalem and hidden by a woman in soapy water.

Yet, this pattern of identity, has the political limitations in the West Bank (eg Israeli Checkpoints), that, in fact, doesn't impact the American citizens and counterparts. This reality determines, for some extent, her view towards the American collective identity. A sense of both admiring and resentment can be felt throughout her narration. She, in a certain point, complains:" You would think our village was in love with America with all the people who have left, like America is the best relative in the world that everyone has to visit. America is like a greedy neighbor who takes the best out of you and leaves you feeling empty" (96). This statement shows, on one hand, her pride of her ancestry of the Palestinian landscape and collective identity, and, on the other hand, her displeasure of with its inability to maintain individual identity.
In - Betweenness
Another located pattern of identity in this novel is the state of being *in betweenness*. Soraya, who lives in the U.S, represents the amoral waywardness of the U.S. and the conflicts over individuality and community. *Soraya* wants to live as an American, but she also wants to be represented as a Palestinian. She likes to dance. Her friend, Ginna, is of mixed background (Russian, Kurian, and Chinese). She is divorced woman living with her mother and her small daughter. *Soraya's* mother doesn't like Ginna's "loose" American behavior.
Soraya has a Muslim friend, Walid, who behaves and dresses like Americans. On Fridays, instead of going to Friday prayers, he spends time in a bar drinking. He dresses in a neat jacket like Mexicans. One day, while he is sitting with Soraya in the bar, talking in Arabic, one white American man tells him to talk in English, thinking that they are Mexicans. When Walid refuses to talk in English, the American starts to beat him, Soraya feels angry, wishing Walid could beat the American and teach him a lesson, especially when they have heard the police respond(they are luckier to be considered Mexicans than Palestinians).Soraya's narrative proves once more the irrelevance of both Palestinian and American collective identities toPalestinians in America, and how they fail to establish their individual existence and identification.
The uncertainties Soraya the character depicts parallels in many ways the *in between* worlds situation, and the emerged experience, of what DuBois first described in *the Soul of Black Folk*(1903)[2]as *double consciousnes*sor double visions, the awareness of belonging to two conflicting cultures: the existence burdened, on one hand , by cultural legacy of the homeland and, on the other hand , alienated by the reality of American society. Soraya, as other characters of thisnovel,

[2] For further details: Getes, Henry Louis Jr. The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988.

triesto envision a state of being in which both cultures can be expressed. Such a state of being proves, nonetheless, to be a site of tension and unresolved contradictions. She says:

"Everyone knows it; they see it in my beautiful brown exotic eyes that I paint full of Maybelline kohl to turn my tears black. "SheArabian, they say at my high school as I pass by them. "In her country they don't have furniture or dishwashers, only oil. I tell them that they want to hear, which is nasty stories about a twelve-year-old girl being carried off on a camel to be third wife to old Shaykh so – and- so and the five oil wells my father owns. My mother exploded the first time she heard about a story I told. 'You have to show the best of us, not he ugly lies.' But I let my ambassador sister and cousins do that while I take ghetto slang. (Halaby, 24).

Her experience of double consciousness, in "a sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (Gates, 1988), has urged Soraya to gain her surrounding acceptance. She longs to be accepted in the American White society; she tells "nasty "stories to attract friends. Yet such stories only set her apart from a White American context for which she longs.

Soraya's mother, who is charged with maintaining a Palestine a home in America (through her labor and child rearing),works as a preserver of the Old Country's traditions within the context of the New American World. She also fails to fulfill this vocation within the new context. Instead, she deepens the daughter's liminal placement andher double alienation. Soraya tells the reader that her mother "can't accept that my way of being different is just as good as everyone else's being the same" she distinguishes herself from her 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" Thus, Soraya doesn't feel totally at home anywhere. (26)

Within the puzzling state of a divided mind and an inner sense of loss, Soraya travels between Nawara and the States in repeated attempts to make connections between what is Palestinian and what is Palestinian American. Through these transitions between places and cultures, she tries to create "different" reality (26) where she can be both Palestinian and American. However, when Soraya visits "boring little Nowara", her distance from people is established; "they talk about how bad I am" she says. Soraya's movement between America and Nowara intensifies her "puzzling state of divided mind". Returning to America, she feels that "the older people all act the same way they did when they were home, which isn't 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) Significantly, the community to which Soraya belongs in the States perpetuates a Palestinian life because "they are not supposed to be living an American life". Being a Palestinian in America, Soraya is considered an American, and therefore, she is considered "bad" in Nawara. The *in – between*, different state of being in which she finds herself fails to bridge the oppositions.

She would never be categorized as a "Good Arab Girl" by her mother and Palestinian relatives, neither would she be considered a true American by her American peers. She describes her affair with an American man, who eventually returns to his "blond American wife and two American children". Therefore, she has acknowledged that she is "a new breed. A rebel." She says,"I am *in- between."* It is no wonder, thus, that the only friend that Soraya has is Ginna Simms, who is a "mix of Russian and Black and Chinese and Puerto Rican" (117-18)

As illustrated and epitomized in the above examples, Halaby reveals how a state of *in betweenness* as a pattern of identity remains complicated to be reached in the light of the complexities emerged as a result of the contradicted cultural values between both cultures. Adopting such a dual pattern of vision through which individual identity might be established, results that Palestinian culture is irrelevant to American life, and, on the other hand, American culture is irrelevant to the Palestinian life. Palestinian American identity, from this perspective, couldn't maintain individual identity in both contexts.

Gender Exile

The third pattern of identity located in this novel is the individual identity that aims to assert personal and individual promotion and progress. Hoda, who is in a constant search for the self, was allowed to study in America because her father believed that "there is nothing wrong with letting a girl learn as much as a boy does". However, once she is suspected of having "disgraced" her family, as one relative in America mistakenly relates, she is ordered to return home" or she would not have a home to return to "as her father threatens. Shortly afterwards "she was married to a Jordanian man and left Nawara forever." Huda becomes a Palestinian exile to Jordan by the means of marriage, and the under the emblem of family. Jordan, for her, becomes both exile and prison.

Her daughter, Hala, rejects marriage andchooses to immigrate to the United States to free herself of exile in Jordan. As a teenager, she immigrated to the United States – Arizona specifically – to study at the urging of her Palestinian mother – Huda. At the start of the novel, she remembers how she felt when she first immigrated: "I was terrified at the thought of being away from my family, even though the idea of going to America – the America my mother had only tasted – was exciting" (9). This passage illuminates how both "America" is the actual physical space and "America" as an idea are employed as a set of "promises", dreamscapes and opportunity to fulfil self esteem and individual promotion.

As an intellectual woman, Hala finds life in Jordan to be unchallenging and even suffocating: "I was tired of being made fun of for reading, for being too headstrong, for speaking my mind." Her mother, Huda, is the one who encourages her daughter to immigrate to the states. "If Hala says here, "Hala's mother tries to convince the father, " she will rot like me and like Latifa. Look at us. We have rotted. Let Hala grow and dream." The father eventually agrees. The "mother knew that she would die, and her final request was to be allowed to return to America. Halaby illustrates that return to the land of origin is not an option for *these* women. Home symbolizes for them confinement and lack of opportunities for growth.

Unfortunately, though, soon after her mother's death Hala's father,awakened by old traditions, hinders Hala's departure to the United States. He made it clear that "he was going to be the one to make the decisions about my life from then on, "Hala laments. "You must think about your life now, and plan to put your roots here as a woman; screen lifted from my eyes," Hala says "I was to replace my mother with a husband. I was to stay in Jordan forever. Marry- engaged even before high school was over. Have children. Be someone else's burden" (12)

Hala explains her resistance and objection to her father's decision because she was influenced by the American culture:"Maybe I spoke because I had learned how to move my tongue like an American. Maybe it was just a grief that made me lose control. Or anger. If I stay here, I will kill

myself. I will go to my mother and then you will have the blood of two people on your hands," she threatens her father (45) .

The transformation of being Palestinian to being Palestinian American complicates notions of social and gender behaviour. A woman, according to the traditional Palestinian father, "must plan to put roots there." (in Jordan) .According to Hala, the woman influenced by America culture must speak her rage out, must be free to plan to "put her roots" wherever she wishes them to be. Hala is made to choose between being either Palestinian or American; she Eventually chooses the latter. She now has to deal with the challenges of defining her Palestinian \ Jordan American identity. Hala's voice finally triumphs. Yet her relationship with her father – and so the homeland – comes to its end. "We did not speak again. Jalal took us to the airport and my father did not come to say good- bye. In one week I lot both my parents," as well as her two homelands: Palestine represented by the mother and Jordan represented by the father (46)

Hala's narrative is a critique of and resistance to the female codes of behaviour dictated, in this case literally, by the traditional of Palestinian culture. Hala chooses immigration to America, rather than return to Nawara. She has no moral or national obligations about the land(s) for her origin, although at the end of the novel, the memory of the land, and not the land itself, becomes imperative to her process of self-definition.

When Hala comes back, years later, to attend her grandmother's funeral, in the section entitled "*White*" she feels " unconnected": " There is comfort to be in my own house, to wake up in my own language, but all those faces I've carried with me for so long wear suspicion in their eyes as they greet me. I had walked so far away from them" (77). Again, Hala finds herself in a state of alienation and strangeness in her homeland, without feeling completely belong to. She feels that 'the house is beginning to close in on "her". As a result, she starts emphasising her differences from her Palestinian relatives. "My sister is the colour of the soil under the peach trees after they have been watered, which is one reason why she doesn't like me: I am lighter than she is" (78).Her relatives call her "American Hala". Colour, in this section of the novel, complicates concept of belonging and national identity. Since she is lighter than her sister Latifa, Hala sets herself apart from her and the other villagers; does not belong there anymore. "White Hala" and "American Hala" become one, claiming America as "homeland".

This strangeness is enhanced and challenged by Sharif Abdel- Hameed, one of her relatives, volunteers to reacquaint" her with her "homeland" or "one of your homeland, at least" as he sarcastically puts it (78- 120). When Hala comes back to attend her grandmother's funeral, Sharif reminds her of a certain incident on a family trip to *Aqapa*. They were two kids standing on the beach of Aqaba when he urged her "let's swim home" "This beach won't reach to Amman," Hala then protests, "how can we swim there if there is no water?" "I mean to Palestine," Sharifannounces." I feel funny inside. We are not allowed to go to there. It's not our home anymore," Hala cries. They start swimming "home" nonetheless. When the soldiers on the boat stop them, asking where they are heading, Sharif is silent but Hala answers '*Home*". The Israeli soldiers, of course, order them to return back (128) . This scene reinforces the inability to return 'home'. Palestine thus becomes symbolic of the character strangeness; it is physically visible, but it can't be accessed. When older family members asked her where she had intended to go, she shouted "We tried to go home!" (129). Though she states this scene in comfort: "That is the sweet picture in my mind as I drift off to sleep, surrounded by my mother presence" (29), Hala finally leaves to America: "It is time to start something new, and something old, not something

unfinished" (204). Her return to Arizona, where she tries to get rid of the past; she becomes intolerant of her uncle Hamdi and aunt Fay's fancy; instead, she wanted to establish her individual identity in a different individual sterile context.

Conclusion

The association between individual and collective cultural identity is one of the major themes discussed in Halaby's *West of the Jorden.*Halaby explores how the collective identity maintains self-identification and selfhood. She handles the theme of identity through three patterns of identity: *Collective cultural identity (*some writers try to reconcile the split vision of the self by reconstructing collective cultural memory),*In Between State (*theorizing a mediate state of being), *and Individual Identity (*its main concern is selfhood and individual promotion). By providing a brief review of how different characters of the novel handle and experience these patterns, the writers argues that both collective identity and the state of *in betweenness* fail to promote individual identity. The irreconcilable Palestinian -Americancultural norms and values deepen the sense of individual alienation. Thus, she ultimately realized (as her West of the Jordan's characters show) that individually work and effort is the mostly appropriate to reinforce women independent self-promotion and individual identity in her sterile independent*home*.

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