
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Is Diaspora the Solution for Women to Obtain their Social Rights? A study of Laila Halaby's *West of the Jordan*

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| ABSTRACT

This study discusses Arab diasporic women's resistance against cultural and social oppression on several aspects of women's lives, such as education and the daily life in Laila Halaby's *West of the Jordan* (2003). It also discusses the role of the Arab diasporic women in the West in confirming or resisting such oppressions. The study also illustrates that although diasporic experiences in the West helped Arab women uproot/resist social and cultural oppressions, in some other cases, diasporic experiences helped reinforce the consistency of such oppressive practices. Laila Halaby in *West of the Jordan* provides several examples of the heterogeneity of the Arab diasporic women's identity/ psychology. For instance, Soraya, one of the four main characters, is introduced as an example of those women who gain freedom in the diaspora, while Khadija, in contrast, experiences more pressure due to her being in the diaspora.

| KEYWORDS

Diaspora, Arab diasporic women, female identity, oppression against women, feminism, integration, postcolonial literature, *West of the Jordan*.

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1. Introduction

In this paper, I argue that education, employment, and the freedom of daily life practices are crucial to women's self-development mission. Without education and employment, women would never be fully emancipated from the influence of patriarchal traditions. By the same token, Fadia Faqir argues that economic independence is an essential key for women's strength since dependent women are "more vulnerable to potential violence within the home" (66). Thus, this idea stems from the fact that Arab diasporic women can never achieve independent identity without achieving economic independence, which, in turn, can be achieved through education and economic empowerment. Further, the paper discusses several types of oppressions, including the restrictions on women's opportunities in employment and education, the restrictions on women's lives and behaviours, the denial of women's rights to determine their own destiny, and the limitation of women's roles in societies.

The diasporic experience of Arab women is unique because it provides women with new opportunities and chances in order to get rid of several oppressive practices imposed on their social and economic rights. In this sense, moving to other countries has two meanings: the literal meaning of movement and allegorical. Passing borders and bridges, for women, means moving physically from one place to another. It is also moving from one cultural milieu to another. In this context, in *Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter*, Susan Friedman explains that:

Bridges signify the possibility of passing over. They also mark the fact of separation and the distance that has to be crossed. Borders between individuals, genders, groups, and nations erect categorical and material walls between identities. Identity is, in fact, unthinkable without some sort of imagined or literal boundary. But borders also specify the liminal space between the interstitial site of interaction, interconnection, and exchange. Borders enforce silence, miscommunication, misrecognition. (3)

The writer and critic, Laila Halaby, is considered a major Arab diasporic feminist voice as a result of her numerous studies in this field and her personal experience as a diasporic woman. She has an undergraduate degree in Italian and Arabic and two Master's degrees in Arabic Literature and Counseling. She currently works as an Outreach Counselor for the University of Arizona's College of Public Health. She speaks four languages and has travelled widely in the Middle East (Laila Halaby Bio 1-4). Being born to a Jordanian father and an American mother gave her the chance to experience life in the midway of two different cultures. She says,

[m]y 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's funny. (American Writers Museum 2)

She published *West of the Jordan* (2003), winner of a PEN/Beyond Margins Award, *Once in a Promised Land* (2007), and *My Name on His Tongue* (2012). Her works are well received in the States as well as in the rest of the world.

2. Education, Employment, and Daily Lives of the Arab Women in Diaspora in Laila Halaby's *West of the Jordan* (2003):

In *West of the Jordan*, Halaby discusses the lives of four cousins who have different backgrounds and lifestyles. Hala, who has grown up in Jordan but gets the chance to pursue her education in the States, visits Jordan and realizes the significant differences between her original culture and the American one. The novel discusses the positive influence of Hala's diasporic experience in the States on developing her identity. It also discusses the negative influence of diaspora on Khadija, the second cousin, as she suffers from her parents' imported Arab cultural practices.

Soraya, the third cousin, seems to be the only character that is able to fully integrate into the American culture and get rid of her original roots. Soraya thinks that the way to integrate into the American culture is through the abandonment of her original culture. Mawal, the fourth cousin, stays in her village in Palestine and never has a diasporic experience. Therefore, she is not going to be included in the study. The novel also has other important female characters like Dhalia, who experiences several hurdles and difficulties in working in the States. Some of these difficulties relate to her husband's social traditions that consider women's work shameful. Latifa, Hala's sister, is also an important character as she symbolizes the product of the Jordanian cultural practices. Several times, she is described as a rotten girl because she has no ambitions and capabilities.

The first character that I am going to analyze in this novel is Hala, as she is the only character who has been able to achieve a kind of balance in her identity due to her contact with both Arab and American cultures. She is also the only character who has directly challenged and resisted patriarchal persecution in her original country, Jordan. Additionally, she has been able to change her father's attitude toward her education and social rights.

To get rid of the restrictions imposed on Arab women, Hala, the seventeen-year-old girl, insists on going to the States to accomplish her dreams. However, her father refuses this without giving any convincing reasons. Hala's mother, Huda, presses that Hala must go to the States to finish her studies. She says to Hala's father: "If Hala stays here, she will rot like Latifa and me. Look at us. We have rotted. Let Hala go and dream" (9). Huda's insistence that her daughter goes to the States to pursue her degree stems from her knowledge of the restrictions imposed on Arab women and from her personal experience as an Arab woman. Thus, she wants her daughter to have a better life and better chances away from such restrictions and limitations.

In fact, Huda's insistence refers to her wish that her daughter must finish what she herself cannot. We learn from the novel that when Huda is at Hala's age, she gets the chance to go to the States to continue her university studies, but she comes back disgraced due to people's lies about her. Therefore, Hala understands that her mother sees herself in her:

My mother was excited, perhaps because she thought I'd have a chance to finish what she barely started, or perhaps because she thought I'd have a freer education. Regardless, 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)

Therefore, besides Hala's desire to build a successful life path, her mother's experience in the United States is also a greater motivation to her. In this sense, going to the States for Hala is the way to get rid of the patriarchal oppression imposed on her by her father. For these reasons, Hala then is able to overcome her anxiety of being away from her family and decides to fight for her goal.

Reading and education have always been some of the things that patriarchal authority most dreaded. In the interest of this oppressive authority, women remain ignorant and illiterate, so they are controlled easily. Therefore, Hala's tenacious habit of reading is a source of dissatisfaction for her family:

I spent a lot of time alone reading, a source of embarrassment and concern for almost everyone in my family. 'She will be blind before she is fifteen years old', Aunt Suha, my father's sister, would tell me every time she came over and found me bent over a book. 'You shouldn't let her do this, or no one will marry her.' (8)

Obviously, the disapproval of Hala's aunt, Suha, stems from her fears that Hala will lose the chance to get married. According to Arab culture, marriage is considered the most important goal for women and their families. Therefore, reading, for Hala's aunt, forms a real threat to Hala's identity: "I was so tired of being made fun of for reading, for being too headstrong, for speaking my mind" (9). Consequently, Hala's father never encourages her to keep reading. On the contrary, he always tries to prevent her from reading: "My father didn't approve of reading outside of school texts, and he used to take away my books when he came across them" (8).

Coming back to Jordan for a visit is not a pleasant experience for Hala, as her father announces that she is not returning to the States. Playing the role of the guardian, he explains that it is time for her to be a woman like any other traditional woman: "'Hala, it is time for you to be with your family. I'm sure you understand. You must think about your life now, and plan to put your roots here as a woman'" (45). Hala's loss of her mother symbolizes the loss of the familial supporter. Therefore, Hala says: "[w]hile [my mother] was alive, my father respected her wishes, but not even two days into my mourning her death, he made it clear that he was going to be the one to make the decisions about my life from then on" (45). Her father realizes this fact and decides now to change Hala's destiny; he decides to plan for her life in Jordan as a woman, which implies that he wants her to be a traditional woman, to get married and to have a family, and most importantly to abandon her education.

Life in the States teaches Hala to defend her rights and reject oppression. Thus, she decides to face her father's decision courageously and explains that she will never give up. Hala realizes that it is necessary to confront her father for the sake of her threatened future, as her surrender in front of her father will lead to being entirely like her mother and sister, rotten and valueless. After her diasporic experience in the States, she realizes the difference between the independent, educated women and the dependent, uneducated ones. Thus, she rebels over her father's will and shows no retreating:

I was to stay in Jordan forever. Marry – engaged even before high school was over. Have children. Be someone else's burden. Maybe I spoke because I learned how to move my tongue like an American. Maybe it was just my 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. (45)

Hala's refusal to stay in Jordan is a refusal to the traditional life she is to live. She explains that her dreams and ambitions do not match such a traditional role. Hence, Hala's reaction is not calm but rather sharp:

But my father must know by now that he will lose me forever if he pushes too hard. I am not willing to stay and take that chance; I realize that now. I will iron smooth my thoughts, try to be patient and kind and see what is in store for me. I have faith that he will do what is right, having already lost so much . . . and so while I remain unconnected, like a charm without a chain to hang from, I am happy. (83)

It seems that her diasporic experience in the States has given her the strength to express her feelings and thoughts frankly, as she "learned how to move [her] tongue like an American" (45). This indicates that her life in the States has drastically developed her identity. In other words, Hala's diasporic experience has given her the chance to form an independent identity away from the patriarchal restrictions of her original country.

Moreover, Hala declares in several places that she feels comfortable in her house in Jordan: "There is a comfort to be in my own house, to wake up in my own language" (77). As explained earlier, her refusal to stay in Jordan is a refusal to the patriarchal system that controls women's life in Jordan. Therefore, the sense of alienation that she feels from people in Jordan is due to the cultural gap between her and them:

I know they see me with curious eyes. I left before marrying age. I finished high school, and I should be coming back for marriage, not death. I should have long hair; I should wear makeup. I should not wear blue jeans and 'extremely unfeminine dresses. (77)

Obviously, Hala's discomfort and anxiety stem from her hybrid culture that joins her origins to the Jordanian culture while attaching her new identity to the acquired American culture. Besides, she is not the type of woman who accepts submission to the patriarchal power of her father. She knows that: "what [her] father has in mind for [her]" is "marriage, marriage, marriage" (82). In addition, she is aware enough to recognize the consequences of being married at a young age to a man she does not love. She also knows that she will not be accepted to live in her original society unless she is married, as marriage is the cornerstone of a woman's life in her country.

Moreover, Hala's outfit does not follow the Jordanian female dress code. Having short hair and wearing blue jeans are socially considered a male-pattern appearance. Therefore, Hala feels more comfortable with less restriction on her dress style in the States. Accordingly, she is now socially and culturally alienated from her family: "It's as if I am watching two people talking as they face a white wall, but I have no connection to them" (78-79).

Moreover, marriage for Hala at this stage will end her dreams and ambitions, for that getting married before finishing university studies is to end up a loser as her mother:

I am not ready to marry at all. I know this. And if I stay here, I might come to feel differently. And then I will be like my mother. The Woman of Unfulfilled Dreams. Better to be like Uncle Hamdi, The Voice of Reason and Capitalism. If I stay, I will be one of my father's jokes too. A joke that makes nobody laugh. (83)

Hala's steadfast stand on completing her studies in the States has a major impact on her father, as he is convinced that Hala as a girl is different from the rest of the women in his community. Therefore, she deserves a better future. It is worth noting that the steadfast position of Arab women in obtaining their inherent rights has significant importance on society's recognition of their rights.

It is worth noting that women cannot achieve progress and development without facing difficulties and challenges, as silence and hiding are not among the appropriate options for women. Abu Jalal, Hala's father, has noticed that Hala has become a different person after living with Hamdi and his American wife, Fay. He states: "I saw Hala when she first came. She really is different from the rest! How does she like living with her uncle?" (83). Therefore, in a dialogue with one of his friends, Abu Jalal, who represents the patriarchal voice, admits that he now sees his daughter differently. He explains that Hala has a rebellious spirit that is inherited from her mother and that she deserves to have the right of self-determination:

Two months she has been here, and I really have no idea what to do with her, so I am going to put her on a plane back to the States. Hala is a kind girl and, you are right, very different from the others. She has her mother's spirit. I was prepared to marry her to someone – a relative – a very good man who would have been a good match for her, but imagine this: he refused me [...] He refused me because he thinks she needs to choose her own life. (195)

This dialogue reflects the patriarchal authority's surrender to women's demands. In addition, Halaby also presents a rare, civilized model of the Arab man who supports women, their stability, and their development. Sharif, refusal to marry Hala and asking Abu-Jalal to grant her freedom of choice, made a self-criticism of the Arab man.

By the end of the novel, a big change in Abu Jala's attitude towards many feminist issues has become obvious. The most notable change is seen through his encouragement for Hala to accomplish her degree and find her path in life. As a matter of fact, Hala's father shows a significant change not just towards her right to study but also towards her right to choose when, where, and whom to marry.

I am proud of you. It seems you are a very good girl [...]. You have changed since you've been gone. I can think of no one here who would be a good match for you now, maybe in several years, or maybe not. Maybe you are better suited to marry someone who isn't Arab. I don't know. I think you should finish – or at least start – university before you get married. (196 – 197)

It is worth saying that this change in Abu Jalal's attitude has not come to light from his own. Rather it stems from Hala's persistence on her stand and her steadfast resistance to his patriarchal authority. Had Hala succumbed to her father's wish, she would now be a model for the typical Arab girl who is subject to patriarchal authority. Eventually, Hala is empowered and rewarded with "the greatest freedom" (197). In fact, Halaby grants Hala a happy end in order to enforce the sufficiency and efficiency of Arab women's resistance against the partiality of the patriarchal system.

On the contrary, Halaby presents the counterpart image for the silent women. Latifa, Hala's sister, is but a reflection of Hala's fears and anxiety. Latifa represents an opposite image to everything Hala looks and works for. Based on this fact, Abu Jalal explains that his "eldest daughter, Latifa, is decaying and causing those around her to decay with the breath she takes, while she spends her days smoking and reading in the bottom of a coffee cup" (83).

In fact, by resisting her father's authority, Hala does not seek to abandon her native culture and replace it with the American one. Rather she seeks to uproot the patriarchal authority while preserving her own culture. Therefore, when she leaves for the States, she does not wear jeans; rather, she wears *roza*, the traditional costume of her country, which implies that she is connected to her culture even more than before:

I am wearing a *roza* that my grandmother made for my mother as part of her trousseau. My mother wore mostly western clothes – skirts and shirts or western dresses – but at home, she did like dish-dashes and this *roza*. I remember her wearing it and being happy. It is not a fancy one, but the pattern is clever, and it suits me. I even imagine it still carries her scent. (I don't tell anyone that it is so hot that underneath it, I am wearing only underwear – not a T-shirt and shalwar pants as my mother would wear.) (203-204)

This part of the novel confirms that the feminist movement's mission in the Arab world does not seek to abandon Arab culture and follow other cultures. Rather, the Arab Feminist movement works for Arab women's freedom and empowerment within their own culture. That is to say, the mission of the Arab Feminist movement seeks to purify Arab culture from its defaults, oppression, and discrimination. In this sense, in "Feminism in Egypt: A Conversation with Nawal Sadawi," Sarah Graham-Brown explains that El Saadawi believes that Arab "women should look for their identity within their own culture" (24) because the process of change always stems from within, and the target of the change is never meant to replace one culture with the other, but to eradicate its double standards and to enforce the fact that women must have a free life that guarantees their social and personal rights.

Therefore, Hala's trip to the States this time is different from the previous one. This time, Hala is more balanced due to her triumph over the patriarchal authority in her country and her triumph in gaining her father's approval and full support. This time, Hala is not the weak and oppressed Arab woman in the diaspora, but a new woman with an authentic identity and multi-cultural experience:

I am starting over, starting over. My mother is always with me. My father has not abandoned me [...]. It is time to start something new and something old, not to fix something unfinished. I will watch just the right way, to see the underside of things, the thinking things and the forgetting things, as my mother used to say. And then I will start university, and I will not come back in disgrace. (204)

It is worth mentioning that Hala's new life significantly impacts her diasporic experience. Besides her triumph over patriarchy, her possession of a new Arab diasporic feminist identity does not label her as a trapped woman in the diaspora anymore. According to this new state, Hala is now empowered and motivated, willing to make progress and achieve her goals as an independent woman. Hala is now free from fear and has the option to return to her original country whenever she wishes.

On the same token, Halaby discusses another social and cultural issue, which is the attitude of some Arab American people towards women's work, as they consider it shameful based on their cultural beliefs. In this context, Dahlia, an Arab American female character, expresses her urgent need for work. However, her husband, who is unwilling to work, opposes her needs and prevents her from working.

Aborting her dreams for the sake of false concepts, such as honor, shame, and manhood, Dahlia's husband expresses his disapproval of her work, stating that "it's shameful" (107). For a long time, social and cultural traditions have played a major role in restricting women's right to work and participate in social activities. In "Women and Work in the Arab World," Nadia Hijab demonstrates that "social and cultural traditions certainly bear on women's status, but it is misleading to see these as the only predominant factors affecting women's entry into the workforce" (51). Therefore, Dahlia discusses in a dialogue with her husband the concept of shame and explains that a woman's work is not shameful because it is a natural right for her. Dahlia emphasizes that what is really shameful is being unwilling to work and relying on government assistance:

But I don't see it that way. What's shameful is an able-bodied man sitting at home on his no-good ass watching his wife clean and cook and do mothering things while he spends all his government assistance money on nothing: a couch with plastic covering and beer that he shouldn't be drinking in the first place. What's truly shameful is those funny-looking four children holding their bellies and stealing candy bars from 7-Eleven because no one gives them enough of anything to take their aches away. (107)

As a matter of fact, preventing Arab women from working basically stems from the chronic anxiety of Arab men about women's chastity. Thus, the concept of shame has been exaggerated in order to be an excuse for preventing women from going outside the home. The concept of women's work, according to some Arab men, has extended the matter of leaving home to become an associate to a real threat against patriarchy. For a significant reason, women's work will guarantee financial independence for women who are persecuted by husbands at home. Therefore, these women are no longer under their husband's mercy and can end their unhappy marriages without feeling any regret. Or say, for example, that these husbands decide to break up with their working wives for any reason, such as hatred, despair, or revenge, these women then are no longer lost because they are financially independent and can survive without a husband's support. On the same note, being financially independent will lead to complete independence that will, in turn, lead to a rebellion against all the masculine oppressive forms that will eventually overthrow the patriarchal system, a system that is originally based on women's subordination and weakness. In this sense, in *The Hidden Face of Eve*, El Saadawi illustrates that:

One of the most important motives for the opposition to women's work shown by many husbands is the fear that independent earning will lead the wife to be more conscious of her personality and her dignity and that, therefore, she will refuse the humiliations she was subjected to before. (191)

Moreover, in "Women, work, and Islam in Arab Societies," Yusuf Sidani has also pointed that according to Fatema Mernissi, a Moroccan feminist writer and sociologist, Arab culture recognizes the public sphere as men's productive arena. In contrast, women are restricted to the private sphere. Therefore, Mernissi explains that this cultural division is the reason behind preventing Arab women from working and labelling their participation in the workforce as "dishonored" (506).

A diasporic experience under family control turns Khadija's experience into a displeasing one. Khadija, a second-generation Arab immigrant in the United States, is the daughter of an aggressive father and a passive mother. Her parents are originally from Palestine. She is neither attached to her original country nor familiar with her born country, the United States. Consequently, having a hybrid-culture makes Khadijah suffer from a fluid identity.

Due to her fluid identity, Khadija always feels detached from Palestine; all she knows about it is given to her through a narrator. Accordingly, she does not consider herself as both American and Arab, but as only American. In a conversation with her mother, she says: "You are Palestinian. I am American" (74), though her mother says: "No! No daughter of mine is American" (74).

Khadija lives in the generation gap between the two cultures of hers and her parents. She does not even acknowledge herself with an Arabic identity as she feels displaced in her own family:

My parents are from the same village in the West Bank, and half of the village lives here in Glendale, Hollywood or Anaheim. The older people all act the same way they did when they were home, which isn't fair in many ways because we're in America now, but they tell us that we are not supposed to live an American life. (31)

Khadija tries to engage in the American society that grants women freedom and independence, but the obstacle of the compulsory traditional customs keeps her away. With every attempt for change, Khadija finds her family in an opposite stand to hers. Her family's strict surveillance creates a nervous mode that makes her behave stupidly. Sorya, Khadija's cousin, states that: "[her] cousin Khadija is conservative too, but [she] like[s] her, except when her parents are around, and she acts stupid like she can't think for herself" (25).

In this sense, "Arab American Femininities - Beyond Arab Virgin Americanized Whore," by Nadine Naber, stresses that the imported cultural traditions represent a reaction against any attempt of integration into the host culture. Naber also confirms that the power of these cultural traditions is represented in the family ties to which an individual belongs:

Cultural authorities-including parents, aunts, and uncles, as well as the leaders of secular and religious community-based institutions-tended, to generate a socially conservative and essentialized notion of "Arab culture" alongside a contradictory desire for the "American dream" and assimilation into American modes of whiteness. (90-91)

In fact, Khadija's inability to integrate into American society is a result of the restrictions imposed on her by her father. Khadija's father is a traditional man who wishes to impose the same traditions that are imposed on women back in his country over his daughter Khadija.

One of the things that prevent Khadija from integrating into both the Arab diasporic society and the American society is the private and public insult she used to experience from her father. An occasion happened publicly when her father grabbed and pulled her while she was dancing with her cousin Soraya:

I didn't notice when Khadija's father stepped into our group and grabbed Khadija. "Slut," he said to Ginna, loud enough that the other women could hear him but not loud enough that the people who were not dancing could hear. "How dare you lay a hand on my daughter." (33)

Everyone in the party admits that Khadija's father treats her badly and causes her public humiliation. Um Ghazi, one of the women, who were at the party, said: "He [Khadija's father] treats his children worse than stray dogs" (34). Soraya's mother, Shahira, also explains that "[she] saw [Khadija's] father dragging her off like a criminal. Soraya adds that "Khadija looked as though she would crumble with humiliation as her father dragged her off" (34).

Consequently, Khadija explains that she "hate[s] dancing in front of [...] people" (75). The reaction of Khadija's father to her dance is a domestic form of violence, in addition to being social violence for affecting Khadija's social standing. Therefore, as a result of the social humiliation to which Khadija is exposed, we find that Khadija's identity oscillates between the Arab identity that is imposed on her and the American identity that she aspires to form due to the opportunities she may have through achieving self-independence and the many social rights.

The attitude and mentality of Khadija's father are understood as a reflection of Arab mentality and as a reaction to living outside his country. He is afraid of his daughter's integration into the American culture that he considers an opposite to his own. In this sense, Nadine Naber illustrates that the old country traditions and customs stand as a barrier between women and melting with

the American identity. She also explains that some Arab families judge their women according to their sexuality; they are either called a good Arab girl or a bad Americanized girl. The image of Arab/ American women is socially demonized for the sake of Arab traditions' preservation. The consistent negative presentation of the Americanized girl functions as a barrier for Arab girls from integration into the American culture.

Since women's sexuality is the reason behind the social and cultural siege imposed on women, men in the diaspora are much willing to integrate into the host society. Therefore, Khadija's sufferance of social and cultural restriction is a method to restrain her sexuality. Khadija explains that her mother makes her aware of this problematic issue:

Ma always used to tell my two half-sisters about boys, especially American boys, and how they will take that secret thing between your legs for nothing. 'No committer.' . . . 'Your husband has to be the one to take it away from you,' Ma told me once. 'Otherwise, you are a disgrace to us, and we are stuck with you forever.' Then she said, in English, 'You shameful.' (178-79)

Therefore, the difference in values between Arab and American culture for Khadija's parents is a moral justification for the cultural and social restrictions they practice on their daughter's freedom. Such a cultural difference creates a social mindset with double standard values that both evaluate manhood and devalue womanhood. Thus, Arab men are never under cultural surveillance while Arab women are consistently monitored and judged according to their double-standard society; that redeems men from any social transgressions while criminalizing women just because of their virginity.

In fact, the discrimination practised against diasporic women is much more challenging than the one practised against women within their original country, for that the original cultural restrictions cannot be effectively employed within the borders of a different culture that has a broader space for women's freedom, available in the States. Moreover, these restrictions have negatively impacted the diasporic women and consequently caused their cultural fluidity.

In this sense, Khadija explains why her father oppresses her as "[he] is a traditional man [...] That's why he is so strict and why I'm not allowed to talk to boys" (149). Being a traditional Arab man implies that he is afraid of his daughter's sexuality and thus imposes greater restrictions on her behaviours. This, in turn, results in more limitations on her social and cultural activities. Khadija then is not allowed to talk or play with boys anymore. Having in mind that mixing between the sexes in the American culture is an essential matter for social integration, in other words, the normal social freedom granted to the American society imposes a threat to the values of Arab families and therefore, as a reaction, they impose a greater siege on their women.

On the contrary, Soraya is able to integrate into the American culture. Despite the fact that she is not considered a good girl, according to her Arab relatives, due to her abandonment of Arab culture and traditions, she has succeeded to establish an independent identity that is different from her family: "My mother is disappointed because I am not a good daughter, but she won't admit she has anything to do with it and says instead that I have a weak spirit and have been taken in by the lie that is America: freedom, freedom, freedom" (24-25). In this sense, Nadine Naber explains that Arab women who challenge their cultural traditions are considered Americanized immoral as whores. In other words, Soraya is judged by her people according to their original values and traditions.

Soraya is negatively labelled by her people due to being fully integrated into the American culture. One example is her shameless way of dancing at weddings. According to the Arab culture, women must dance in a way that does not attract men: "I love going to weddings, but my mother hates me to go and worries that I will do something she thinks is unacceptable, like what happened when we were in Nawara and went to my cousin Jalal's wedding" (26). Soraya's way of dancing challenges her cultural traditions, and therefore she is continuously criticized: "They talk about how bad I am, especially at weddings in the States" (29).

Soraya explains that her parents cannot understand that their generation and reality are completely different from hers. The problem for Soraya is that her parents, as with the first generation of immigrants to the United States, had imported the culture of their origin to their host country, which forms a big obstacle for the second generation of immigrants, their children: "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're in America now, but they tell us we are not supposed to be living an American life" (31). Due to this clash between the two generations, the second generation can neither accept these old traditions and customs nor fully integrate into the host culture.

Thus, Soraya considers herself a unique woman who is different from all other women in her family and has no hesitation in engaging herself in the American culture. She is able to get rid of her family's culture, which she considers not to be her own, and manages to establish an independent and genuine identity that represents her. Unlike Khadija, she succeeds to build a good friendship with both men and women, as well as having many sexual relationships: "I am a new breed. A rebel [...] I have men as friends, as well as lovers" (56).

In other words, Soraya does not experience the same problem Khadija has experienced with her identity. Soraya's independent identity relates to her freedom from the American culture. In addition to this, Soraya presents rigid self-determination, as to choose the lifestyle she wishes to live, unlike the rest of her female relatives: "I choose what I do. I have always chosen what I do" (190). Hala explains that because of the different life paths Soraya chooses, people always criticize her: "People say vicious things about Soraya and what she does. I think it's because she does the things people are scared of" (82).

In fact, Soraya's dissatisfaction and refusal to follow the Arab culture comes from her knowledge of the several restrictions imposed on Arab women in general and on the Arab wives in particular. Soraya believes that marriage ends the life of Arab women, as the Arab wife becomes the hostage of her husband: "I don't want a husband who walks under clouds, that is not my freedom" (190). She wishes to be in a relationship that is free from limitations. Thus, it is important to note how positively the American culture has impacted Soraya's identity.

On the same note, Soraya is concerned about her mother's plan to wed her after finishing high school. She does not want to become a copy of her mother; a typical Arab wife that is only concerned with house affairs: "I know she can't wait until next year is over and I'm done with high school so she can marry me off and concentrate on the things that matter to her, like her house and her hair" (24-25). The reason behind the desire of Soraya's mother to wed her daughter is to restrict her sexual freedom by imposing a cultural siege on her to marry an Arab man. In fact, Soraya's mother is anxious due to the imported cultural beliefs regarding the virginity of girls. Her mother tells her: "*[y]ou are nothing without your virginity. 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*" (190).

Obviously, the mother's warning about the significance of the Arab girl's virginity has not received Soraya's attention, as she knows that she "choose[s] what to do. [She has] always chosen what [she does]. We are in America now" (190). Virginity is a possible excuse that matters in the Arab World for the restrictions imposed over women's freedom. However, this does not work with Soraya's unlimited freedom that she has in America. In this sense, in "Reflection on Sex, Silence and Feminism," Nathalie Handal explains that women should deconstruct the notion that their sexual activity would dishonor their families. She argues that women must get through the experience of "unveiling of the mind" (101). Therefore, Soraya rejects the patriarchal traditions imposed on Arab women in their home countries and in the diaspora and acts according to her new Arab American identity.

Unlike Khadija, who is always criticized by her family, Soraya criticizes her parents for practising their country of origin's customs in the States. In other words, Soraya, as a second immigrant generation, is more privileged with her diasporic experience than her mother, as being much willing to engage in the American society.

"I like to have fun, to enjoy myself and to feel good. I have always been that way. My mother tells me how wrong this is, like it is evil or something, and my sister says the same thing. I think they think it's wrong because they don't know what it is to be satisfied, and it scares them." (30)

One more thing that Soraya is critical about is the social perception of the Arab American people about women. The Arab woman is expected to be less intelligent than her husband, and if a woman shows to be more intelligent than her husband, she will be described as a headstrong wife:

I think some of the problems was that Suad was a very smart girl, and even though Sameer was so nice and all, he wasn't that brilliant. Maybe what my mother and all those ladies had been calling "headstrong" for generations was really just women being smarter than the men they were married to. (88)

In this context, El Saadawi emphasizes that the manhood of Arab men prevents them from accepting that their wives are smarter or better than them. Therefore, they always tend to undermine their wives' wit and resort to controlling their women instead of developing their skills. El Saadawi adds that:

Arab men, and for that matter most men, cannot stand an experienced and intelligent woman. It would seem as though the man is afraid of her because of her capacity to understand him and see through his failures or weaknesses, if necessary. She knows very well that his masculinity is not real, not an essential truth, but only an external shell built up and imposed on women by societies based on class and sexual discrimination. ("*The Hidden Face*" 189)

Thus, the difference between Soraya and the rest of the women in her family is not only a difference in a generation; rather, it is a difference in intelligence and approach to life. Moreover, it is a difference in the impact of diaspora that confirms Arab women's heterogeneity. Diasporic women react differently to circumstances that affect the development of their identities and the degree of their independence from the patriarchal hegemony. In this context, Soraya has made it clear that she is a new woman that does not resemble anyone else in her family.

To this end, the endeavours of Arab women to eliminate the oppression imposed on their rights and the restrictions imposed on their life are among the most important steps towards their independence. Education and employment provide women with the power to become independent and free from restrictions that gradually minimize their dependency on patriarchal power.

In this context, there is no doubt that the life of Arab women in American society has drastically influenced reshaping their identity. However, the reformation of the Arab female identity does not mean rejecting the original Arab identity and replacing it with the American one. Rather, it relies on the reestablishment of the female identity to flexibly adapt to the American culture in a way that is based on the rejection of all forms of oppression and guarantees a personal space of freedom that does not form a cultural clash within the female personality. In other words, life in America is a mature experience that gives Arab women a window to assess their situation first in their original country and then in the diaspora, where they eventually meet the necessity for change by developing their skills through education and employment and thus to become independent and able to represent themselves.

3. Conclusion

To sum up, this paper examines the restrictions imposed on Arab women in the diaspora through the study and analysis of Laila Halaby's *West of the Jordan*. It discusses the importance of Arab women's struggle and resistance to these restrictions and challenges and how serious these restrictions are to degrade the quality of Arab women's life. The oppressive practices that restrict the advancement of women aims at keeping women under the mercy of men.

Moreover, women's access to their cultural and social rights has a significant impact on their greater goal; as to get rid of all forms of oppression and restrictions imposed on women, they must activate their rights of education and employment for that they are the keys to their independence from the patriarchal authority. Women's economic and intellectual independence is the starting point, and without achieving this independence, women will remain prisoners to the patriarchal societies and their oppressive traditions.

Furthermore, in Halaby's *West of the Jordan*, the importance of breaking the silence and struggling for women's inherent rights have become clear by analyzing Hala's character. Had Hala not confronted her father's authority and resistance, she would have ended up as a married woman without a college education. In addition to this, the novel criticized having marriage as a substitute for education and employment, as some Arab extremist societies believe. The novel has also confirmed that education and employment are pure personal rights that must be granted to every woman as they are essential for women's success in their mission for freedom.

Significantly, Arab women's diasporic experience is not always the way out from the oppression of Arab traditions. Khadija is considered an example of a diasporic woman who suffers from the oppressive Arab traditions in the States. That is to say; many Arab diasporic women suffer from the imported Arab traditions, which lead them to suffer from double oppression, the oppression of the imported Arab traditions, and the oppression of the host society due to their inability to integrate into the new society.

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