| **RESEARCH ARTICLE**

Arab Diasporic Women Between Challenges and Opportunities in Al-Shaykh's *The Occasional Virgins*

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| **ABSTRACT**

This study discusses Arab diasporic women living in the ethnic communities in Western societies in Hanan Al-Shaykh's *The Occasional Virgins* (2015). The novel shows how different and multiple types of oppression affect women's life and how Arab diasporic women respond to such situations. It also traces Arab women's resistance to patriarchy in their native culture and the challenges of adaptation to the new country. Furthermore, the study comes across the significant role of homeland–memory and experience in moulding Arab diasporic women's identities. Such memories are used to challenge host countries' racism and cultural stereotypes to construct true Arab female identities and rebirth, new strong Arab women.

1. Introduction

To some Arab women, diasporic experience is a unique experience. Diaspora enables many Arab women to move away from their patriarchal homelands, which limits women's freedom, to another society. Therefore, diaspora, immigration, and migration have a major impact on the development of their identities. However, the diasporic experience is not a pleasant experience for other Arab women, as in one way, they are alienated from their country of origin, and in the other way, they experience discrimination and difficulties by getting integrated and melting in the host countries. Therefore, some of the Arab diasporic women experience fluid identities, in which they are unable to survive in their original countries and rebel against their traditions and customs or to fully integrate into the host culture.

Arab diasporic women get through many oppressive experiences that affect their mission to construct independent identities during their diasporic experience. On the one hand, some of these oppressive practices relate to their home culture because they suffer from both the impact of their permanent memory and the necessity to restrict this memory to the limits of the host country. The memories of women in their home countries are an important factor in the success or failure of women in the host countries. In some cases, these memories are considered a motive for self-reconciliation and achieving independent identities.

The familial restrictions imposed on Arab women are among the main reasons for women's inability to integrate into the host countries. In some cases, home-country's imported traditions and customs are also considered the main reason for violating women's rights and hindering them from expressing their genuine identities. That is to say, "the continued importance of traditional kinship systems is identified as a key cultural factor inhibiting the formation of feminist identities" (Marshall & Read 879).

Moreover, in *Le Harem Politique,* Fatema Mernissi warns that celebrating the Arab traditions in the host countries is a means to enforce male dominance over women. She adds that: "the return to the past, the return to the tradition which males are now claiming, is a way to put things back in 'order.' An order which no longer suits everyone, especially the women who have never accepted it" (qtd in Cherif 215).

The starting point of this paper discusses the influence of the homeland patriarchal oppression on Arab women before moving to their host countries, the influence of the memories of Arab women in their home countries, and their struggle and reaction to such patriarchal practices. Then, I move to investigate the influence of the oppressive practices that relate to the host countries, such as racism, religious discrimination, and Islamophobia. This part also discusses the methods used by Arab diasporic women understudy to integrate into the host countries and to construct their genuine identities.

2. Al-Shaykh's *The Occasional Virgin* (2015)

In *The Occasional Virgin*, Hanan Al-Shaykh recounts the story of two Arab diasporic women; Huda, a Lebanese Muslim woman, and Yvonne, a Lebanese Christian woman. The story is divided into two parts, one of which takes place in Italy, where the characters meet on the seashore and exchange some worries and memories and live emotional adventures, and the other part takes place in London a year after their meeting in Italy, where they meet to spend a vacation that is transformed into an adventure.

Huda lives in Canada and works as a theatre director. She is unable to tolerate the previous restrictions imposed on her in Lebanon. She tries to find her identity in Lebanon but faces many cultural obstacles and religious barriers due to her family's extremism. During her journey for a genuine identity, she passes through several stages; in order to find freedom, she adopts a conservative Muslim female identity, a male identity, and lately, a car's identity. However, instead of confirming her identity, she ends up losing her authentic identity and self.

The other character, Yvonne, lives in London and works in the field of advertising design. Yvonne suffers from her family's partiality against her. Her family discriminates between her and her brothers. However, she manages to surpass her brother Tanius in swimming and diving, which helps her acquire an independent identity. Yvonne's story shows that Arab communities have a negative attitude towards women's superiority over men.

Religious extremism is one of the most critical factors affecting women's development in their countries of origin and the diaspora. Through the dialogue that takes place in the Speakers' Corner in the northeast corner of Hyde Park, the author has detected religious extremism and fanaticism among some Arab people who have lived for many years in the Western countries. The girls enter into a long debate on a number of issues, such as the veil, the *halal* and the taboo, the marriage of minors, and the status of women. Consequently, Huda is violently threatened by the Algerian Hisham. He curses her, swearing that she is honorless.

Huda decides to teach him a lesson about the concept of honor by arranging a seemingly accidental meeting and pretending to feel dizzy and lonely to trick Hisham and seduce him. Using four artificial virginity products, she manages to have sex with him four times in a row, making him believe that her virginity is eternal. Huda manipulates Hashim's fake religious beliefs about women's virginity and its association with female honor. As a rebel against these beliefs, she succeeds to prove Hashim's ignorance and shallowness.

The novel reveals that religious extremism has nothing to do with the cultural stereotypes that restrict women's honor to the safety of their virginity. In fact, Al-Shaykh explores how religious extremism has impacted Arab women's psyche. For instance, Huda's memory is restrained by the painful memories of the cruel treatment that she received from her extremist parents. The novel also comes across many issues that concern Arab women in the diaspora, such as the significant impact of childhood memories, the influence of religious extremism, its role in reviving the pain and memories of Arab women, the influence of religious hypocrisy, the concept of virginity and honor, and the necessity to establish a genuine identity for Arab women in the diaspora.

 In this vein, Huda and Yvonne manage to prove that women's honor is a big myth that has been created by patriarchal societies to control women's activity and limit their success and movement. In other words, patriarchal communities impose several restrictions and limitations on women's private, social, cultural, economic, academic, and political life in order to protect their honor, which is placed in women's virginity (Faqir 69). Therefore, women's sexuality has been moved from the private sphere to the public (Abu Odeh 917-918). That is to say, according to the extreme Arab patriarchy, women's sexuality does not only relate to a woman's family but also the whole community, for that women's sexuality is the representative of her family's honor.

The Occasional Virgin is mainly based on a critique of the concept of virginity in Arab patriarchal societies and their ignorance of the nature and function of the hymen. Hence, by showing the easiness of deceiving a man with an artificial hymen, the novel suggests that patriarchal societies must change their philosophy about the concept of honor and its association with the hymn, for that the existence of the hymn does not necessarily approve woman's chastity. In contrast, the loss of the hymn does not, in fact, approve the opposite. In this novel, Al-Sheikh aligns with El Saadawi's point of view about the concept of honor and virginity. In *Woman and Sex*, El Saadawi emphasizes the urgency to reform the honor laws in the Arab world for that the current ones are only applied to women without men (39).

That said, the novel handles two types of actions. The first is the past memories that occurred in Lebanon before the characters' immigration to the host countries and their impact on Huda and Yvonne in Lebanon and after their immigration to the host

countries. Second is the effect of religious extremism on women in the host countries: 1), religious extremism or religious hypocrisy has a role in distorting the image of the true Islamic religion that respects Muslim women, and 2) reviving the painful memories, as happened with Huda in remembering the painful hot chili in her bottom.

Although the novel conveys the characters' memory about their misery and suffering in their country, Lebanon, the unfair treatment of their families, and their ability to rebel against patriarchal hegemony, it is essential to note that Al-Shaykh does not confine patriarchal practices to a specific culture or religion. Rather she criticizes cultural practices instead: "[Huda and Yvonne] laugh together at the Lebanese mentality. Neither thinks of saying 'Christians or Muslim, we all do the same things" (31).

Indeed, such practices against children create a feeling of hatred that leads to a further feeling of alienation, self-denial, and consequently, a loss of identity. After experiencing physical and psychological abuse, Huda swears to "get [...] revenge on all of you, you'll see" (74). She rejects her family's violence and oppression by swearing revenge for her childhood, memories and self.

In this sense, Qasim Amin in *The Liberation of Women* and *The New Woman* illustrates that women's rejection of such oppressive practises is a sign of women's maturity and awareness; "It is obvious that a woman who has advanced, and who realizes her rights, will not accept the harsh and humiliating way in which she was treated when she was ignorant" (98). Therefore, protesting against such oppressive practices constitutes the beginning of Huda's maturity and awareness of her rights.

Thus, Huda remembers that before confirming her authentic and genuine identity, she passes through several stages: alienation, self-denial, fluid identity, and finally self-realization. Huda, first, obliterates her identity as a female, so she covers her whole body to become a subject to the authority of her family in an attempt to reach peace in her life, but instead, she reaches the stage of self-denial and becomes neither able to see herself as a male, nor as a female, or even as a human:

> That day she began covering her hair from genuine conviction. All that showed were her hands. Her dress reached well below her knees. She no longer felt weighed down like before and tried to be passive, like her mother and most of the girls in the family, going from home to school and back again, letting life move sluggishly along on crutches, and being as her parents wished her to be: neither female nor male, not even human. (74)

Moreover, Huda makes a second change in her identity by turning herself into a boy-like girl; she cuts her hair and dresses in a boyish style. Her desire to transform her female identity into masculine identity results from her desire to enhance her family role and resist the patriarchal oppression that privileges men over women: "*I want to be a man!* Men are kings and ghouls don't cover themselves". (109) Dissatisfied with women's stereotypical roles in her community, Huda changes her gender identity in order to gain greater freedom. In this sense, In "Gender Identity," Shuvo Ghosh "indicates that: Gender identity is defined as a personal conception of oneself as male or female [...] This concept is intimately related to the concept of gender role, which is defined as the outward manifestations of personality that reflect the gender identity" (1). Aware of women's status in the Arab world, Huda seeks to change her identity instead of changing her situation, which results in further loss, self-loss, and identity distortion.

Despite the changes that Huda goes through, she does not feel that any of them represents her or grants her a feeling of satisfaction. Therefore, aspiring for absolute freedom, Huda decides neither to be a female due to the multi-layers of oppression women suffer in Arab society or becoming a male because she realizes that she has moved away from her true identity. Accordingly, "She wanted to be a car so she could travel through the streets in broad daylight or the depth of the night with only freedom as her companion". (109)

Huda is unable to reach an authentic and genuine identity until she immigrates to Canada. There, she has total freedom that enables her to freely practice her life without any restrictions or limitations. Therefore, after her first intimate experience, Huda feels that she has come to fulfil her identity, as her ability to express herself and to practice her sexual need without being afraid of punishment or consequences helps her fulfil herself and achieve an identity that is based on her needs, desires, principles and intrinsic qualities as a woman. Thus, Huda "was still under the tormenting effect of chilli pepper [until] she had got rid of her virginity" (111-112).

On the other side, Yvonne has memories similar to Huda's. She could not accept the situation of women in Lebanon, as she always felt that she was less respected, less appreciated and less human than men. "Arabs always prefer males to females, even though it's the girls who usually stay close to their families" (214). Yvonne illustrates that women in Lebanon, as in the rest of the Arab world, are inferior to men and are expected to be submissive, marginal, and obedient. Arab patriarchal societies believe that women's progress means men's weakness and inferiority. Therefore, Yvonne recounts her struggle with the unfair treatment of her parents, as they always prefer their son, Tanius, to her: "[w]hen one of [my] brothers was ill, [my] mother would put vinegar compresses on his forehead to draw out the fever, muttering, 'May Jesus reach out his hands to heal you. May the Virgin Mary intercede for you. May I die if it will make you better" (24)?

To explore these discriminative actions, El Saadawi explains, in *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World*, that such practices drive Arab women alienated from their-self and simultaneously affect both men and women (10). On the one hand, these practices greaten the domination of men over women, as they are fully privileged with the support and love of family and society. On the other hand, they worsen women's situation in family and society, destroy women's confidence, and weaken their trust in themself, their families and society.

Jumping from the forbidden rock while men are afraid to do so, Yvonne proves that she is a rival to her brothers and that she succeeds in competing with them. Yvonne's success "humiliate[s her] eldest brother. Destroyed him. Castrated him" (25). It also helps Yvonne to reform herself: "this time she went down until she almost touched the bottom. She understood why this rock was forbidden [...] in short, that she had become an expert swimmer and diver" (23-24).

In an attempt to start a new life free of patriarchal hegemony, Huda and Yvonne decide to leave their country and achieve their dreams. The diasporic experience has influenced them both positively and negatively. As an instance, Huda would not be able to achieve self-realization, construct a genuine identity, and be a theater director, has she stayed in Lebanon: "I left Lebanon because [...] I didn't have the courage to pursue a career in theatre with my family around" (39).

Similarly, had she stayed in Lebanon, Yvonne would not be able to practice diving, develop herself, acquire new skills, and manage a leading advertisement company. She would end up a powerless housewife: "I wouldn't be on my own now, I'd have got married, and my family would have stuffed me with food like the white goose so that my bridegroom, the ghoul, could devour me" (165). In other words, diaspora provides Huda and Yvonne freedom, space, and opportunity that they were supposed to have in their original country, have they lived in a place that respects women.

That said, through their journey of moving from the country of origin to the host country, Huda and Yvonne have also lost several things. They have lost some of the bonds between them and their original country that causes them psychological suffering: "Am I still Lebanese? Shall I turn the page of Lebanon and my family? Perhaps I've half turned it already" (165). In this context, in *Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter*, Susan Friedman illustrates that diasporic experience is crossing literal borders and metaphoric. She elaborates that: "Borders between individuals, genders, groups, and nations erect categorical and material walls between identities" (3).

In other words, I believe that Huda and Yvonne's diasporic experience does not begin after leaving their home country; they were already diasporic women in Lebanon. The Arab patriarchal life has forced women to construct several borders between themselves and their home country and feels that they are alienated and do not belong to their cultures, communities, and even their families. Some women manage to cross the metaphoric borders without or before leaving their countries; Huda and Yvonne are good examples. Others manage to cross the literal borders physically but are still trapped within their home country's metaphoric borders; Abu-Jaber's Fatima in *The Arabian Jazz* is excellent to bring here. That is to say, crossing the metaphoric borders is more important than crossing the literal ones.

Moreover, Arab diasporic women encounter many critical issues in the diaspora, such as racism, religious extremism, and religious hypocrisy. Thus, the novel explores the influence of extremism, of both the Western and the Arab communities, on Arab diasporic women. First, the novel emphasizes the intolerant attitude of the European extremists towards the immigrants, which consequently increases the suffering of diasporic women:

> A woman in her fifties [...] addresses the crowd: God created people in vast numbers of races in order that each race should stay where they are and not stray from their roots. If they emigrate to another country, they disobey the creator and rebel against His just will. (81)

As previously discussed in this paper, the rejection of Western societies to Arab diasporic women represents one of the biggest obstacles that face them; racism places women under double oppression, racism, and patriarchy. Racism affects diasporic women's ability to assert their identity and progress. In this context, Susan Muaddi Darraj argues that, unlike American women, Arab women encounter racism and sexism, and therefore, she is against the following:

> [T]he popular feminist slogans "The personal is political" and "The political is personal" are inapplicable to [Arab women] She argues that [Arab women] fight two separate battles—one at home against sexism that is personal and one in society against racism that is political. (Abdulhadi et al. xxxviii)

Nadine Naber adds that racism forces women to choose between racism and sexism, which affect women's stability and progress. Therefore, Naber: "calls for a new movement that resists the choice between racism and [...] sexism" (Abdulhadi et al. xxxviii).

The vague image of Arab and Muslim women may be the reason for encountering racism; for example, the veil is a controversial issue, whether in the West or the East, especially its many forms, such as the *burqa* the *niqab*, and *hijab*. Therefore, the loss of clarity drives Westerners suspicious about the identity of the Arab/ Muslim woman. In the novel, an Englishwoman complains to Huda about her Muslim neighbour, who wears *Burka*. The Englishwoman is suspicious about her neighbour's identity:

> I'm sorry to say that I'm scared each time I see her, and I only feel reassured when I hear her voice. Sometimes I think she might be a man! Maybe she's like the terrorist who managed to escape from a London mosque hiding behind a chador and burka, or the thieves who wear burka and rob jewellers' shops! (98)

On the one hand, the veil is considered a symbol of oppression, a symbol of religious extremism, and a symbol of different values. Therefore, one may wonder about the reason for covering the face, as the face is related directly to the person's identity. That is to say, how can a woman construct an independent identity free from oppression without revealing her face? In the late nineteenth century, Amin emphasizes in *The Liberation of Women and The New Woman* the necessity of uncovering a woman's face in order to liberate her mind (37 - 59). Haideh Moghissi, in *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism: The Limits of Postmodern Analysis*, joins Amin in the necessity to abolish the veil in order to liberate Muslim women (13- 31). Moreover, Cromer adds that the Veil is the reason for women's oppression for their inferiority (qtd in Ahmed 153).

On the other hand, the veil is considered a symbol of freedom and an integral part of Muslim women's identity. In *Women and Gender in Islam*, Leila Ahmed denounces the postcolonial discourse that aims to distort the veil's symbol. She explains that the veil is an essential part of Muslim women's identity, and it is unacceptable to label it as oppressive by the patriarchal and colonial powers:

> The feminist agenda [...] Because of this history of struggle around it, the veil is now pregnant with meanings [...] the veil itself and whether it is worn is about as relevant to substantive matters of women's rights as the social prescription of one or another item of clothing is to Western women's struggles over substantive issues. When items of clothing [...] have briefly figured as focuses of contention and symbols of feminist struggle in Western societies, it was at least Western feminist women who were responsible for identifying the item in question as significant and denning it as a site of struggle and not, as has sadly been the case with respect to the veil for Muslim women, colonial and patriarchal men, like Cromer and Amin, who declared it important to feminist struggle. (166-167)

Therefore, I believe that there should be a logical dialogue between Arab and Western women to understand each other's needs, concerns, and issues. In the novel, after Huda had explained to the Englishwoman the story of the niqab, the Englishwoman is more relaxed: "The Englishwoman gasps in surprise. How strange! I wonder if women who wear the niqab today know this story?" (99).

Second, the novel also raises the issue of religious extremism in the Arab countries, represented by Huda's father, *the Sheikh*, as well as the danger of conveying this extremism to the Western countries, especially on Arab women. A great deal of Arab women emigrates from their countries of origin basically to get rid of extremism, violence, and oppression. However, they are confronted with further extremism in the host society, which doubles their suffering.

In this sense, Hisham's extremism in the Speakers' Corner reminds Huda of her father's. The discussion they engage in about Islam's stance on a woman's covering face and hair frustrates her not only because of his fanatic and conservative beliefs about women and virginity but also because of the dialogue's style that carries the extremism's ideology, that shows bias against other religions and beliefs.

The danger of this extremist mind lies in the denial of the other, the non-civilized manner and the irrational attack against the other. Therefore, Hisham judges that Huda is not a Muslim and that she has no right to speak about Islam just because she is unveiled: "you're not a true Muslim, for here you are with your head and face uncovered and arms bare" (100). Hisham goes further and gives himself the right to speak in the name of Islam and to decide who has the right to speak about Islam and who has not: "I forbid you categorically to talk about Islam in this irresponsible way" (100).

In fact, Hisham is furious because Huda addresses several important feminist issues in the Arab world under the name of Islam, such as the marriage of the underage girls and women's honor: "violent extremism [...] cannot be dealt with without addressing the broader issues of religious freedom and women's rights" (Ispahani 104). Hisham, who does not reflect the actual image of Islam, transcends the limits of high-end dialogue to threaten and intimidate Huda: "The anger of the youth's face was terrifying as he said to her informal Arabic: 'Do you know that hens are slaughtered if they cry like roosters?" (100).

Hisham's threatening indicates that women, who try to compete with men to obtain their rights, are actually trying to be superior to men and therefore must be killed: "I'm threatening her and you, and everybody who interferes in what doesn't concern them, for they'll hear things that they won't like" (101).

Despite the fact that the Speakers' Corner is considered one of the freest places in the world where a person can express their opinion freely without being afraid of others' reactions, Hisham proves that he does not belong to this place intellectually, as he denounces women's right to express their opinions or even leave their homes for work or entertainment: "your place [Huda] is in the kitchen, not here" (104).

In "Women and Islamist Extremism: Gender Rights Under the Shadow of Jihad," Farahnaz Ispahani demonstrates that:

> Currently, traditional, conservative, and patriarchal societies in most Muslim-majority countries tend to ignore women's education, their participation in the workforce and their rights [...] Islamist groups [...] reject the concept of women's rights being equal to men's rights [...] For decades Islamists and traditionalist Muslims have questioned the Western ideal of full and equal participation of women in public, especially political, life. (101)

It is worth noting here that the novel's criticism of religious extremists does not rely on criticism of the religion itself. There is a vast difference between the teachings of Islam and what people practice under the name of Islam. This is what Huda seeks to explain to the English woman about the *burka and niqab*. Many people consider *burka and niqab* (women's face covers) as part of the teachings of Islam, but it goes back to the pre-Islamic Arab culture:

> Huda answers sharply, 'Islam doesn't say that a Muslim woman has to wear a niqab or a burka. This is heresy; otherwise, you'd see all the Muslim women on the pilgrimage to Mecca with their faces covered [...] the niqab wasn't known until a young girl from an Arab tribe covered her face when her father tried to marry her off to a man against her will, and in those days a woman couldn't go against her family's wishes.' (98)

In this sense, Hisham's fanatic and extremist views of women remind Huda of her fanatic and extremist family and the oppression she experienced in her homeland.
According to Hisham's extremist mentality, unveiled women are not virgins. Therefore, he does not expect Huda is a virgin woman. Huda has deconstructed one of the patriarchal principles: the belief that a woman's honor lies in her virginity. She deconstructs the myth behind oppressing women and sealing them up in order to protect their virginity and honor:

> The strawberry has restored her virginity. The red stain spreads joy over the bedding. Such a stain has its rites and traditions. If blood flows, the girl's family dance in delight and hold their heads high, for it is an irrefutable sign of their daughter's purity, and the bridegroom's family rejoice because he is a true man and has succeeded where others have failed. (139)

The moment Huda succeeds to seduce Hisham and deceive him with her fake virginity is her moment of victory when she succeeds to rebel against the social oppression, overcoming the patriarchal borders, revenge for herself and her sex, uncovering the fragility of the fanatic beliefs and threatening the stability of the patriarchal system. Huda recounts that after she is able to deceive Hisham and teach him a lesson about virginity, she does not anymore feel the hot chili in her mouth or butt, and she feels that she has freed herself from the past oppressive memories.

3. Conclusion
To sum up, this paper examines the difficulties and obstacles Arab diasporic women face in the host societies through the study and analysis of the characters of Huda Yvonne. It discusses the importance of Arab women's struggle to create a genuine identity that represents themselves. In addition to this, it examines the role of the ethnic and gendered homeland–memory in moulding Arab diasporic women's identities.

Moreover, it emphasizes that Arab women in the diaspora have a greater chance to get rid of the patriarchal hegemony. However, Arab diasporic women have different challenges that greaten their suffering. The challenges relate to both their country of origin and the host country where they move. The challenges that relate to the original country include the painful memories, nostalgia, the extended influence of patriarchal cultures on host countries, religious extremism and religious hypocrisy. While the challenges that relate to the host countries examine Arab diasporic women's ability to integrate into the new culture, the degree of being accepted into the host community, and the ability to balance their original culture and the host culture.

Through the examination of the above-mentioned characters, we know that women's ability to challenge the social, cultural and familial obstacles of their patriarchal community helps them reform their lives and establish authentic identities that represent them.

In *The Occasional Virgins*, women's moving to live in other countries enables them to change their reality. The real alienation for women is to be alienated from their self. Therefore, Huda and Yvonne, the rebellious form of characters, are able to build up a successful life by believing in their abilities and striving to achieve their goals and dreams. If women believe in their internal power to resist patriarchal oppression, they will succeed in overcoming the difficulties that confront them in both cultures and consequently establish a genuine identity that is entirely free from all external restrictions. The paper also stresses the necessity to change the Arab mentality that associates women's honor with their virginity in order to pave the way for women's freedom and progression. Had women been emancipated from being prisoners of their virginity, they would be able to overcome all forms of restrictions over them.

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