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Images of non-Arabs in *West of the Jordan* by Laila Halaby

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Abstract

The Jordanian-American novelist Laila Halaby is perceived as one of the most well-known contemporary Arab-American writers whose hyphenated identity raises questions regarding which side of the hyphen she belongs to. In this respect, one way to determine whether Halaby identifies herself as an Arab or an American is to examine how she perceives and explores Arab and American cultures and to investigate the different images she constructs about Arabs and Americans. In *West of the Jordan* (2003), throughout the tales of the four female cousins, this American writer of Arab descent explores the Arab communal values and conventions, as well as the Western beliefs and ways of life. Most importantly, Halaby depicts different images of Arabs and non-Arabs in the context of social, political, and economic conflicts and relationships. In this article, the focus will be mainly on the images of non-Arabs in *West of the Jordan*. My study, accordingly, draws on Edward Said's *Orientalism* and its counterpart *Occidentalism*, which offer theories of communal and identity construction, as well as practices that lead to stereotyping discourses about the other. This article will consequently start with a definition of the term *Orientalism* and its counterpart *Occidentalism*, moving on to deal with the different images of non-Arabs in the second part. Indeed, this latter section investigates how Halaby, who belongs to the Western and Eastern worlds, produces knowledge of the Western

society and culture, by offering interesting representations of the two worlds. The third part will shed some light on Halaby's attitude toward the American world and toward the Arab-American relationships.

Keywords: Orientalism, Occidentalism, image, schema, Arab-American, Arabs, non-Arabs

In his pioneering book *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said elaborates on how the Orientalist discourse conceives not only "a basic geographical distinction" between the East and the West as "the world is made up of two unequal halves, which are Orient and Occident" (12) but also a whole set of "contrasting [interests], image[s], idea[s], personaliti[es], and experience[s]" (12). This distinction between East and West, Orient and Occident, the self and the other, and the Arab and non-Arab world is further displayed in the following lines from "The Imagined West: Exploring Occidentalism":

> Said described exhaustively the traditional distorted European view of the East as the polar opposite of the West, or 'the Other' … The result is an almost tangible and inescapable image of the world divided into coherent units, one of which is called 'the West'... Although Orientalists actually differed in their attitudes toward the Orient, to Said they were all the same in that they imagined the East and the West as essentially different, or as ontologically binary cultural entities. (Jouhki and Pennanen 1-2)

Still, the main questions that are raised at this point are: what contrasting interests and experiences do the Westerners and Easterners have? What impressions, visions, or images do they hold about each other? How is the West represented by Westerners and the Other? In this context, it has been asserted that "to understand the images of the West, it would be helpful first to take a look at how its counterpart, the East, has been viewed in Euro-American thought" (Jouhki and Pennanen 2). Interestingly enough, the East

has been commonly perceived as a collectivist culture which values family unity and stability and believes in the central roles of the family and communities; yet, it has also been stereotyped as an underdeveloped society. The Orientals have been typically viewed as "irrational, emotional, . . . and collectivist, and on a lower level of progress and civilisation compared to the West−which justified their colonisation" (Jouhki and Pennanen 2). Said analyses and evaluates *Orientalism* as the process of "making statements about [the Orient], authorizing views of it, describing it, . . . settling it, [and] ruling over it" (3). In other terms, *Orientalism* is foregrounded by Said as "a Western style for . . . having authority over the Orient" (3).

While *Orientalism* is Said's concept for stereotyped Western views of the East, its counterpart *Occidentalism* is the style of thought that represents the West. *Occidentalism* "includes both the self images of Westerners and images of Western society as the Other. The value statements made about the West can be either negative or positive, or even mutually contradictory" (Jouhki and Pennanen 4-5). Yet, in "The Imagined West: Exploring Occidentalism," it has been argued that images of Westerners as the Other are almost often derogatory as Occidentalists usually express adverse or disapproving judgments on the Western society, culture, and politics. Indeed,

> perhaps more often in academic texts the word Occidentalism means 'anti-Westernism', or movements and / or ideologies that reject rather than advocate ideas, political processes, or material objects labelled Western. . . . According to Bryan Turner (1997), Occidentalism is thus a fight against – not advocacy for – 'modernization'. Ian Buruma goes further and describes how aggressive Occidentalism . . . makes non-Western Occidentalists reject what is seen as the cold, mechanical West, a machine-like civilization characterized by emotionless rationalism, cynical secularism, self-centered individualism, and power hungry colonialism. The East, in contrast, in this kind of counter hegemonic Occidentalism, is a place where family values,

> tradition, spirituality, mortality, and hard work are valued. (Jouhki and Pennanen 4)

The images of the Other manifested in *Orientalism* and its counterpart *Occidentalism* reveal a set of dualities, or binary oppositions, including those of rationality and emotionality, individualism and collectivism, modernity and backwardness, etc. Because America is visualised as the land of opportunities and promises, individualism, and materialism, it has been "thought that the Oriental way of life could bring some valuable spiritual content to the soulless, materialistic, and over modernized society of the West" (Jouhki and Pennanen 2). From an Eastern perspective, it is within this world of antagonisms between the Oriental and the Occidental cultures and lifestyles that a sense of reconciliation and harmony could be set and felt.

It has been estimated that "the United States became the new hegemonic world power, and at the same time the Americans took a central role in the imagined West" (Jouhki and Pennanen 1). Images of the West have been proliferating to depict the rise of the American age and to value or denigrate the prevalent spirit of American individualism and rationalism. The Jordanian-American novelist Laila Halaby plays a part in representing or constructing images about the West, and particularly about the American world. Through the alternation of the narratives of the four young cousins, Hala, Soraya, Mawal, and Khadija, Halaby's *West of the Jordan* exposes how the different Arab-American characters, who are oscillating between the West Bank of Jordan and America, face these dual cultures and shape views of the Occident. Mawal, who lives in the village of Nawara and tells stories about Arabs living in America, is "the stable [character] steeped in the security of Palestinian traditions in the West Bank" (Shuman). Khadija, who lives in Los Angeles, experiences a self split between her conservative Arab life at home and the liberated lifestyle of Americans. She is "terrified by the sexual freedom of her American friends" (Schuman). Hala, who is a student in Tucson, is "torn between the pull towards Jordan and her reality in Arizona"

(Schuman). She believes in America as the land of opportunities and fulfilled dreams. Soraya, however, is a rebellious character who revolts against Arab traditions and standards and "tri[es] to adjust to the fast culture of California youth" (Schuman). As an Arab-American writer, Halaby produces a Westerner's self-image and at the same time an image of the Westerner as the Other. Still, before providing a detailed view of the West from the perspective of a writer who belongs to two diverse backgrounds, those of the Occident and the Orient, it is important to decipher the literal meaning of the key literary concept of *image*.

It is quite difficult to give just one definition to the term *image*. John Anthony Cuddon suggests that "the terms image and imagery have many connotations and meanings. Imagery as a general term covers the use of language to represent objects, actions, feelings, thoughts, ideas, states of mind and sensory or extra sensory experience. An image does not necessarily mean a mental picture" (413). An image may be defined as a mental picture when we form a specific representation of someone in one's mind. It may also be described as a notion, an impression, a vision, or a perception. Images are generally conveyed by figurative language, as in metaphors, comparisons, similes, synecdoche, onomatopoeia, and metonymy. An image may be visual, olfactory, tactile, auditory, gustatory, abstract and kinaesthetic. One of the literary devices used in the novel is the visual image depicting Mexicans. The latter are marked by their physical appearance, and specifically their clothes. Indeed, the "jackets" (Halaby 60) and "the black alligator skin cowboy boots" (Halaby 57) represent a Mexican style and construct a pictorial image of Mexicans. In her story "Visas," Soraya expresses how her friend Walid "always looks neat" (56) and "just like a Mexican" (56), not only with his cowboy boots and jacket of "black leather, like cool with gold leather on the shoulders" (56) but also with his "droopy mustache on either side of his lips" (Halaby 56). Walid states that he feels "comfortable" and "like a man in charge of himself" (Halaby 56) in this distinguished mode. Still, Soraya reports how her companion was mistreated and even "beaten up" in Samson's bar because he was thought to be a

Mexican. Through the physical characterization of Walid, Halaby draws a gloomy picture about the racially oppressed Mexicans in America.

It has been asserted that one "construct[s] an image of the other often in the idiom of [his/her] own cultural values and materials" (Marger xv). In other words, the tendency to judge other groups is based on the standards and ethics of one's group. In this respect, whether Arabs tend to construct a positive or a negative image of non-Arabs, they always do it based on their own communal values. In *West of the Jordan*, Arabs hold a negative view of Americans who are seen as sexually liberated. The recurrent use of the adjective "nasty" throughout the novel intensifies this unfavourable image. In the part of the novel entitled "Crossing" narrated by Mawal, Halaby emphasises that American teenagers appear to have nasty and promiscuous behaviours due to the fact that they engage in sexual relationships before getting married. Mawal reports the story of a Palestinian woman who had been living in Puerto Rico and then decided to come back to her homeland Jenin because she wonders "how [she] can let her children grow up in a place where girls are women at eleven years old" (Halaby 52). Similarly, Khadija, who is depicted by her cousin Soraya as "conservative" (Halaby 25), is usually shocked by the sexual freedom and moral conduct of her American friends. In this vein, it has been proclaimed from an Eastern point of view that "the West is a significant symbol for modernity and freedom− which might also mean promiscuity and recklessness−seen rhetorically in polar opposition to 'truly Muslim' customs, which encourage strong marital bonds and emphasise tradition" (Jouhki and Pennanen 8). Yet, the Arab characters are not only frightened by the sexual freedom American girls enjoy but also by the liberated lifestyle American boys lead. Indeed, the latter are perceived as drunkard. *West of the Jordan* represents American boys as victims of alcohol and illustrates that excessive drinking among American teenagers is common. For example, in her story "Traditions," Khadija recalls some memories about her American friend Jennifer and remembers how the latter’s older brother "[drinks] beer at all hours of the day"

(Halaby 151). Besides, Arabs reveal the image of the gun-obsessed American. Because America is one of the countries where carrying firearms is legal, armed American boys hang out in the streets. In Mawal's story "Crossing," the Palestinian woman expresses that she "can [not] close [her] eyes to the crime and the lack of morality" (Halaby 52) in Puerto Rico, where "boys shoot real guns at each other at twelve" (Halaby 52). The fact that young American boys use real guns emphasises the idea that crime has become a major pastime for some American youth. Undeniably, the way non-Arabs are visualised through Arab eyes denotes the extent to which Arabs find it difficult to be assimilated within the American culture because of the gap between their ethics and moral standards, and the freedom America seems to offer.

Furthermore, the novel also highlights the image of Americans as money- and time-conscious people. As a matter of fact, as the novel suggests, life in America is fast paced, and it is all about making money. The image of Americans as materialists is reinforced through the food image. The American fast food culture is an obvious hint to the American obsession with saving time and money. The novel illustrates that people in America do not want to waste time on anything, even preparing food. For this reason, they have invented fast food and become its largest consumers. Most importantly, Halaby's attempt to entitle one of the novel's sections "The American Dream" (Halaby 106) is made deliberately and it has an undeniable significance. The idiom of "The American Dream" symbolises a promise for the possibility of social advancement, prosperity, and success. This slogan suggests that everyone has the opportunity in life to achieve material well-being and progress through his/her participation in the economic life. In *The Politics of the American Dream: Democratic Inclusion in Contemporary American Political Culture* (2013), the concept of the American Dream is defined as "a vision of life in which one's status at birth does not determine one's station in the rest of one's life. Instead, one's own ability, god-given talent, and hard work determine what kind of life one gets to live" (Ghosh 28). That is why, Americans are conscious of the importance of time and

intense work in order to lead a happy and comfortable life, especially as opportunities and resources are available to everybody. Indeed, it has been stated that "some generalizations about the Dream relate it to individualism, equal opportunity, level playing field, abundance, endless choices, success, virtue, unsullied newness, limitless resources, infinite possibilities, the inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, a hard work ethic, house, car, beauty, youth, talent, . . . etc " (Ghosh 28). What Halaby implicitly seeks to project through spotlighting the fast food culture and the depiction of the hectic lifestyle of Americans in her novel is their possible drawbacks on family and society. Indeed, the strains of this modern daily living in pursuit of materialism would create an imbalance between work, relationships, and parental duties. In other words, it would prevent parents from experiencing real constructive relationships with their children, and accordingly threaten family and social life. This is conspicuously tackled and criticised in Halaby's work through the description of the sexual freedom and liberated lifestyle of the American youth.

The novel's characters are aware of the fact that America is the land of unhampered ambitions, dreams, and achievements, yet they are also conscious of the drawbacks that the diligent American lifestyle may bring. Mawal, for instance, thinks that "big, greedy America" (Halaby 20) may devoid its inhabitants of genuine feelings and emotions. In Mawal's view, indeed, "America is more like a greedy neighbour who takes the best out of you and leaves you feeling empty" (Halaby 13). She refers to her uncle Hamdi who "had been trained to see glitter" (Halaby 98) and, hence, "got bored after a few weeks home and would go running back to [his] busy li[f]e" (Halaby 99). Drawing on the stories she is told by her grandmother, Mawal deduces that making money seems to be the only benefit one may gain in America. Indeed, she reveals that "what people only whisper about is the good that has come from all the leaving: money" (Halaby 96). However, in her story "Success," Soraya gives the example of Sameer Samaha who "never seemed to get distracted by glittery Los Angeles" (84) and rather "came to this country to be a success story, not millionaire success" (Halaby 84).

Soraya explains that Sameer's ultimate obsession is to have "a place [in America] and family life and a house in Nawara and lots of kids and enough money to be a happy kind of success" (84). In Soraya's opinion, Sameer's tragic death underlines the extent to which the reconciliation between the American ideology of hard work and the Arab family expectations seems to be challenging and intricate. Her final words in "Success," "so that is what you get for Working Your Ass Off and then trying to be traditional" (Halaby 95), reveal her belief in the necessity of self-adjustment to one ideology and commitment. It is the fast culture of California youth that Soraya prefers and yearns for. Likewise, her cousin Hala explicitly states her inclination towards the hard work ethic and the "American dream" ideal through her revelation that "better to be like Uncle Hamdi, the Voice of Reason and Capitalism" (83) than "like her mother, the Woman of Unfulfilled Dreams" (Halaby 83). That is why, she keeps rejecting the idea of marriage, which may restrain her ambitions and doom her to the fate of her mother. The stories of Mawal, Soraya, and Hala reflect the image of a capitalist American society that privileges time and money.

Moreover, in *West of the Jordan*, Americans are seen as ignorant of other countries and cultures. Indeed, as America is the world in the American perception, most of these people are not curious to know what happens outside their country. In other words, the fact that American people generally believe that their country is the most powerful one in the world, whether economically, politically, or military, makes them feel indifferent to learn about others. However, "present US dominance in cultural globalisation, politics and economics requires others to learn about it" (Shora 23). In the novel, Halaby highlights the American ignorance of other countries through the strange comments that they make about Arabs. As a matter of fact, Americans think that in the Arab world there are no "furniture or dishwashers, only oil" (Halaby 24). Besides, they believe in "nasty stories about young men sticking their things into goats and some twelve-year-old girl being carried off on a camel to be third wife to old shaykh[1]" (Halaby 24). An experience encountered by Halaby when she was

young exemplifies such comments. Recalling some beliefs made by her American classmate, she admits in an interview in the *Tucson Weekly*: "I remember a boy in my first grade class, when he found out I was Arab, asked me how many camels I had and how many wives my father was married to" (Schuman). Halaby expresses that such a question was "shocking" to her, and she further explains, "all these years later and I still remember this comment. It wasn't with malicious intent, but I find it mind-boggling that he asked it" (Schuman). Whether in life or stories, Halaby records and unveils the American perceptions of the Arab world as primitive, and even barbaric.

On the other hand, Americans are also viewed as superior and advanced. The American superiority is made obvious in the novel through their attempt to stereotype others. *West of the Jordan* shows that stereotypes about Arabs are widespread in the American society. It has been estimated that what could partly explain why Arabs and Muslims continued to be heavily stereotyped is the idea that to "stereotype others might be a common way for people to maintain a positive image of themselves" (Zabel 88). Indeed, stereotyping Arabs and Muslims serves to enhance the West's perception of their cultural, political and economic superiority over the East. In the novel, the American belief that Arab countries do not have "furniture or dishwashers" (Halaby 24) and that "camels populate the Arab world to the extent that each person owns his or her own camel" (Shora 46) does not only reveal the Western stereotypical images of the under developed and uncivilised Arab world but also the American images of themselves as being advanced, civilised, and superior to others. Hence, through demonising the Eastern world, Americans assert their superiority in opposition to the Arabs' inferiority and backwardness. In this context, Said postulates in *Orientalism* that American superiority "produces its own distorted knowledge of the other, . . . its own reductive images, [and] its own disputatious polemics" (xvii).

Whenever one tends to interpret the term *image*, it is of paramount importance to link it to the notion of schema. As a point of fact, schemas are "abstract knowledge structures that specify the

defining features and relevant attributes or a given concept" (Stangor and Schaller 7). The term schema has broad influences upon the person's perception, impression, vision, interpretation, storage of social information, as well as behaviour toward others. In simpler words, schemas provide a basis for making judgments about others, hence constructing images of others. According to the schema theory, "meanings are not 'contained' within the text but are constructed in the interaction between the text and the interpreter's background knowledge" (Semino 124). Indeed, the activation of schemata[2] allows us to make predictions, to draw inferences in our process of comprehension, and to generate expectations that fill in what is indirectly mentioned in the text. For instance, we are likely to assume that the word "petroleos" (Halaby 52), mentioned in the novel to describe Arabs, allows to draw the image of Americans as hegemonic and imperialist even though the text makes no explicit reference to such conceptions. Indeed, the common American belief that Arab regions possess oil has been an influential factor in motivating the American policy toward Iraq. Amal Abdelrazek postulates that "the turbulent Arab American relationship stems partly from American interference and intensive involvement in political affairs of different Arab countries. This arises chiefly because of America's interest in the region's oil" (5-6). Yet, it is important to note that the weakness and underdevelopment of some Arab countries were regarded as something inviting American interest, political imperialism, and colonisation. In other terms, some Arabs' degeneracy and backwardness paves the way to Americans to dominate and have authority over the East. It has been claimed that "the Orient was the object of the West's colonization and of fantasies and generalisations that had little to do with reality" (Jouhki and Pennanen 1). In *Orientalism*, Said asserts that the fact that the Orientals were generally represented on a lower level of progress and civilization compared to the West has justified their colonisation. In this respect, Said evaluates "the relationship between Occident and Orient [as] a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony" (5). It is noteworthy to mention that the image of Americans as

domineering and hegemonic makes them become designated as hostile by Easterners.

In addition, the word "petroleos" (Halaby 52) in the text triggers the image of Americans as being submissive to the authority of the media. Implicitly, this word, which is meant to stereotype Arabs, reinforces the image of Americans as being easily influenced and manipulated by the American mass media. It is true that stereotypes could be learned through direct interaction with others, yet "cultural approaches consider the ways that stereotype [can also be] learned, transmitted, and changed through indirect sources – information gained from parents, peers, teachers, political and religious leaders, and the mass media" (Stangor and Schaller 10). In America, the form by which most stereotypes are transmitted is through the various means of mass communication including broadcasting and publishing. In other words, media is a key constructor of ethnic stereotypes. *In West of the Jordan*, the prejudices that Arabs are "petroleos" and that Arab countries are oil suppliers are fuelled by the media. In *The Arab-American Handbook: A Guide to the Arab, Arab-American and Muslim Worlds*, Nawar Shora asserts that generally "most media portrayals of Arabs and Muslims are negative" (60). The American prejudices are shaped by political statements and media reports that almost focus on the image of Muslims as petroleos, extremists, and terrorists. As Said points out, "the label 'terrorist' serves the general purpose of keeping people stirred up and angry, media images command too much attention and can be exploited at times of crisis and insecurity of the kind that the post 9/11 period has produced " (xix). Effectively, the events of September 11, 2001, on the world Trade Centre in New York have exacerbated the image of Arabs in the American media, and hence play a crucial role in hardening the attitudes of Americans towards Arabs. After the attacks of September 11, Arabs "have increasingly received more overt discrimination, negative stereotyping, and hostility in the US" (Abdelrazek 7). In the aftermath of that event, the East has come to signify threat and danger for the West, and Americans have become suspicious and hostile toward Arabs, Arab-Americans, and

Muslims. The Bush administration explains that event within the framework of the clash of civilisation and puts it within the Manichean discourse which is a binary discourse based on the demonization of the other and the glorification of the self. The Manichean discourse highlights the dichotomy between us and them, and good and evil.

West of the Jordan does not only reveal the current or conventional stereotypical beliefs that Americans have about Arabs, but also the stereotypes that Arabs have about Americans. Yet, before investigating the stereotypical images of Americans, it is important to define the concepts of prejudice and stereotype. "Prejudice involves a judgment, based on a fixed mental image of some group or class of people and applied to all individuals of that [group or] class without being tested against reality" (Mason qtd. in Marger 50). Ethnic prejudices are based on group images called stereotype which are mental images and generally described as "picture in the head" (Stangor and Schaller 3). For instance, Arabs hold the belief that Americans are blond. They assume that people with "blond hair" (Halaby 114) and fair skin are supposed to be American. This image is made obvious through the recurrent use of the expression "blond American" and through the following descriptive statement, "my hair is too dark, too thick, my skin is too far away from white to let me even pretend to be an American superhero" (Halaby 60). Obviously enough, Arabs consider that the physical feature of blondness is typically American regardless of how common such a trait is in that part of the world. Arabs also stereotype American as foolish. Indeed, Mawal's mother describes Soraya as having "the foolishness of an American" (Halaby 19). Mawal reveals that whenever she leans towards Soraya's kind of witless thoughts and fantasies she is restrained by her mother. The daughter asserts that she "wants to be mischievous" (19) through, for instance, "star[ing] at Miss Maryam's large pointed breasts" or "stand[ing] this much closer to the vegetable man who winks" (19), yet her mother "believes that feelings and thoughts such as these will . . . make her turn out like her untame cousin Soraya, who . . . has the foolishness of an American in her blood" (Halaby 19).

Accordingly, the perception of Arabs that Americans are foolish is due to their belief that Americans sometimes behave in a silly or irresponsible way. Yet, if one considers Martin Marger's definition of stereotypes as being "erroneous or inadequate group images" (50), then the Arabs' view of blondness as a major characteristic of Americans and their view of Americans as foolish would be merely stereotypical misconceptions.

Conversely, a positive image of Americans as individualistic and free people is also highlighted in *West of the Jordan.* Gregory Marcus argues that "regarding the United States, perhaps no core cultural value has received more attention over the years in both scholarly and popular literature than has individualism" (403). Fay is the character in the novel who best epitomises the image of the individualistic American. Her statement "don't do anything you don't want to" (Halaby 83) intensifies the idea that Americans have a devotion to this cultural value. Indeed, they glorify the person who stands alone and makes his/her own decisions. Put differently, these people consider that idealism could be attained through being independent and self-reliant. It has been acknowledged that "probably no country in the world has as deep a cultural commitment to individualism as the United States" (Marcus 404). Interestingly enough, Americans are "trained from very early in their lives to consider themselves as separate individuals who are responsible for their own situations in life and their own destinies" (Althen 5). This is part of their belief in the national ethos of their country which is the American Dream. Critics attest to "the enduring centrality of individualistic values to the American ethos" (Marcus 403). Through the character of Fay, Halaby's novel seems to celebrate the doctrine of individualism and to join the prevalent literary embrace of "the most fundamental of American values" (Marcus 404).

West of the Jordan investigates other favourable images of Americans, such as the view of them as tolerant. Americans express their openness to understand the different other. Even though there exist differences between the West and the East in terms of their backgrounds, ways of life, and tastes, the interaction between them

is one of mutuality. Many of the incidents in the novel bear witness to Americans' expression of happiness, their enormous enthusiasm for Arabs, their love for them and their sense of unity with them. Hence, the relationship between Arabs and Americans is an intimate one based on mutual love and understanding. As Said suggests, "as much as the West itself, the Orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West. The two geographical entities thus support and to an extent reflect each other" (5). The character of Ginna Simms, who lives next door to Soraya in Glendale, California, and who is "the weirdest mix of Russian and Black and Chinese and Puerto Rican" (Halaby 29), epitomises such a harmonious union of the West and the East. In fact, Ginna Simms' attempt to dance conservatively during an Arabian marriage and to wear a long dress implies the American respect for the Arab mainstream culture and to the beliefs and practises that differ from their own. Soraya acknowledges that "Ginna knows how conservative our culture is, though, so she didn't wear one of her usual tight little skirts, just a dress that reached her ankles that made my mother tell her how nice she looked and how glad she was that she was joining us" (Halaby 31). Soraya likewise notices the way "Ginna danced conservatively . . . as though she were also from [their] village and had been doing this forever" (Halaby 33). Thus, Americans prove to be tolerant with others through their adjustment of their behaviours and lifestyles during their daily communications with Arabs. Despite the clash between Arab communal ethics and Western values, Arabs and Americans prove to understand each other's differences and to influence each other's tastes, lives, and aspirations. Said declares that "rather than the manufactured clash of civilisations, we need to concentrate on the slow working together of cultures that overlap, borrow from each other, and live together in far more interesting ways than any abridged or inauthentic mode of understanding can allow" (xxii).

As an Arab-American woman writer, Halaby is well-acquainted with two distinctive cultural backgrounds. Her "own

experience navigating dual cultures is at the heart of *West of the Jordan*" (Schuman). Because of her hyphenated identity, she might be perceived as oscillating between the two cultures and feeling a tension arising between them. Similarly, her Arab-American characters in the novel "are stymied by the complexities of their mixed identities and the inability of those around them to understand that complexity. The characters struggle to find homes for themselves between Arab and American cultures" (Majaj). Yet, the main question that arises here is whether Halaby, as an Arab-American woman writer, tries to identify with either culture. Accordingly, on the one side, it is quite obvious that Halaby seems to glorify American exceptionalism, individualism, freedom, and tolerance. On the other, she sheds light on the challenges that face Arabs and Arab Americans in their daily life within the American culture. She tries to highlight the idea that the hardships Arabs confront in their daily communication with Americans are due to the clash between Arabs' ethics and codes of behaviour and the western values. Besides, Halaby writes as an Arab feminist whose project is to unsettle the rigid stereotypes that so often imprison Arabs behind walls of misperception. This Arab-American woman writer challenges the existing negative stereotypes about the Arab world; she postulates that she has always believed that "if other people could see [her] world, could see a Palestinian, Arab, or Muslim family, from the inside, then they couldn't have such ridiculous and negative stereotypes" (“Biography”).

It has been argued that "hyphenated identities evoke questions and debates about what side of the hyphen a person belongs to" (Zabel 3). Halaby identifies herself not as an American or an Arab but as an Arab-American. "I was always in this purgatory state of 'otherness', neither here nor there" (Schuman), she once confessed. She tries to identify with either culture with a distance because what Arab Americanness provides her is the double perspective. She criticises as well as celebrates her own cultural contexts, whether Arab or American. Halaby moves with fluidity between the two worlds and does not show any attempt to revert to one side of the hyphen. It is notable that throughout the

novel this writer explores the diversities and the tension between the Arab communal values and the western values, but she seems to honour the diversity of the Western and Eastern experiences and tends to create spaces in which Arab and American experiences can be articulated and exchanged. As a Jordanian-American novelist, Halaby is "conscious of serving as [a] bridge between East and West, and actively sought to establish philosophical meeting between Arab and American ideologies and contexts" (Majaj). Still, Halaby believes in the importance of her role in bridging these two worlds not only as a writer of a Jordanian father and an American mother but also as a universal writer. She affirms, "I see artists as translators/interpreters . . . [who] offer us an eye into someone else's world and help dispel stereotypes and misconceptions by tugging at that universal spot, that humanity within us all" ("Laila Halaby: Winner of the PEN").

To conclude, *West of the Jordan* examines positive and negative images of Americans. The latter, indeed, are seen as advanced, civilised, individualistic, and tolerant. Because they are inspired by the American Dream as a vision of life, they believe in its values of individualism and particularly in the hard work ethic. All of these favourable images seem to imply Halaby's pride of her American cultural background. Yet, this Arab-American writer also attributes unfavourable images to Americans such as being sexually liberated, superior and domineering, ignorant of other countries and cultures, imperialist and hegemonic. Hence, by investigating favourable and unfavourable images of Americans, Halaby seems to be criticising as well as celebrating her American cultural context. She explores the beauty and charm of the American culture. and, at the same time, engages in strong critiques of the American world.

Notes:

[1] Shaykh: from the Arabic word *shaykh* literally, old man (Dictionary.com).

[2] Kant describes schemata as structures of the mind that represent concepts and that guide our perception and comprehension of the world (Semino 126).

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