

# The Rhizomatic Arab American Identity in Laila Halaby's *West of the Jordan*

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**Abstract**—This paper is an exploration of Arab American identity in Laila Halaby's novel *West of the Jordan* in relation to postcolonialism. The purpose of this paper is to trace Arab American identity development *West of the Jordan* and to negotiate how the Arab American identity manifested itself in the diaspora to create a rhizomatic identity whose multiplicity denies singularity. The process of identity negotiation for bicultural individuals is psychologically challenging. Arab Americans in particular deal with this process in an environment where they are continuously viewed as "The Other." Using the concepts of Homi Bhabha, Edward Said, and Stuart Hall in relation to the postcolonial theory, as well as Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's concepts of the rhizomatic identity, the study analyzes how Arab American identities are represented in the work of Halaby.

**Index Terms**—Arab American identity, identity negotiation, diaspora, post-colonialism, rhizomes

## I. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary American literature has explored the construction of the Arab American culture, giving way, in turn, to a solid platform for a literature that pertains to this minor group. Lisa Majaj, in her article, "Arab-American Ethnicity: Locations, Coalitions, and Cultural Negotiations," explains how the prosperity of Arab-American literary production in the past years reflects "the shifting historical, social, and political contexts that have pushed Arab-Americans to the foreground, creating both new spaces for their voices and new urgencies of expression, as well as the flourishing creativity of these writers" (1999, p. 65). This flourishing is a product of writers who found themselves immersed in a heavily assimilated American context; a cultural milieu where they, eventually, integrate with using their original culture and creating cultural hybridity. Thus, when reading most of their writings, readers can see their suggested psychological mechanisms of responding to the pressure of maintaining their Arab identity while still preserving their steady paces to assimilate to various cultural, political, and racial backgrounds.

*West of the Jordan* by Laila Halaby is an expressive novel by a female writer who is both Arab and American. Halaby is the daughter of a Jordanian father and an American mother and is currently living in Tucson, Arizona with her family. In an interview, when she was asked about what inspired her to write about women coming of age in both Palestine and America, Halaby answered:

Mostly because these were the people in my world, but also because I was intrigued by the perception, or misperception, of Arab women versus the reality of Arab women. So often I would hear words like "submissive," and yet the Arab women I knew were among the strongest women I'd met. I am also interested in the effect that occupation, and exile, whether self-imposed or not, has on an otherwise intact family set-up. (Beacon Press, 2003)

Through the chronicles of four young cousins narrated in 1<sup>st</sup> person singular, Halaby engages her readers in the lives, relationships, and love stories of girls seeking their national, cultural, and gender identities in *West of the Jordan*. Mawal is the steadiest one, as her life and identity are secured in the Palestinian traditions of the West Bank. Hala is wavering between two opposing worlds—Jordan and America. Khadija is petrified by the sexual freedom of her American friends, and mutilated, physically and mentally, by her abusive father. Soraya is misled while trying to copy life in a foreign land, and inept in coping with the fast culture of California youth. Intertwining their stories, Halaby grants us the chance to see each cousin from multiple points of view.

In *West of The Jordan*, Halaby creates an original story, eye-opening into the rich and intricate Arab world. Henceforth, this paper is concerned with presenting an overview of the novel and approaching the protagonists from the theoretical angle of hybridity and rhizomatic identity. The aim of this paper is to scrutinize the characters, their life experiences, and their surroundings. The typical image of a rhizome seems to render itself as either explicit and verified, or, demolished and obscure in the characters, their life experiences, and the surroundings. The process of analysis targets mainly: Hala, Mawal, Soraya, and Khadija.

## II. DISCUSSION

The analysis begins with the place as a rhizomatic entity. Most significant of all places is the village "Nawara," Mawal's hometown, as it crystallizes the rhizome theory. In describing the rhizome, Deleuze and Guattari (2004) state that in its planar movement the rhizome defies organization, "instead favoring a nomadic system of growth and propagation" applying the same description to culture, they argue:

In this model, culture spreads like the surface of a body of water, spreading towards available spaces or trickling downwards towards new spaces through fissures and gaps, eroding what is in its way. The surface can be interrupted and moved, but these disturbances leave no trace, as the water is charged with pressure and the potential to always seek its equilibrium, and thereby establish smooth space. (p. 25)

Therefore, the rhizomatic character is almost always flexible and resists molds of categorization. Correspondingly, some places have their very special marks, while other places are just blunted with no distinct traits, "daytime normal with an occasional scary night, too thick silence, or a shrill scream to jazz them out of dusty boring" (Halaby, 2003). Through Mawal's person-first narrative, every place is marked with a special scent, and a special feeling: "you can talk about a place by the feeling you get from it, like the creepy feeling place." A significant place is just a character; i.e., every distinct place has its own character, atypical of stereotyping, filled with its own special memories, spreading scents and feelings, that are unique and incomparable, just like an indefinite-shaped rhizome. The word "Nawara," means flowers or blossoms, and Halaby remarks that when Nawara is mentioned, "a hillside small white flowers comes to mind, or the fragrant new blossoms on an orange or an almond tree" (p. 14).

Mawal goes on to describe her village as "an island," that is "famous for beautiful embroidered dresses" although the other villages that surround it, "do not embroider at all" (p. 15). The embroidery is reminiscent of the fingerprints which precisely distinguish one person from the other, and this is also suggestive of the fourth characteristic of rhizomes mentioned in the introduction: "cartography and decalomania." Again, decalomania is the process of transforming designs from paper onto glass or porcelain; yet, the designs here are transformed on cloth.

Deleuze and Guattari point out, "The rhizome operates by variation, expansion, conquest, capture [and] offshoots" (p. 79); the same is the embroidery in Nawara, Mawal says:

"The complicated embroidery on our Rozsa –with both Palestinian and western stitches and patterns—capture the spirit of Nawara, which sits at the top of the West Bank, [...] far enough away from both of these places to be a peaceful village that only every so often releases an avalanche of stones and fire. This is something that happens more often as the Israelis take parts of our village to build their settlements." (p. 15)

The idea of expansion, conquest, variations, and offshoots are apparent. There are always variations, movements, and maneuvers until stability and equilibrium prevail. Indeed, the metaphor of the embroidery builds up the perfect rhizome.

Another point remains in the analogy between Nawara and the rhizome, which is the ability to be reconstructed after rupture, to replicate and rebuild itself again. This same idea is mentioned about Nawara when Mawal says, "Nawara could have a smaller version of herself in the United States, which is like an army calling all able-bodied young men away and then never returning the bodies" (p. 15). Mawal believes that Nawara could have been replicated in the States, and the States is likened to an army that grabs the powerful youth and never sends them back; that is to say, something is being ruptured here, the whole is no longer a whole. In other words, the rhizome is being ripped, but this time the rebuilding fails.

Concerning time, Deleuze and Guattari point out that the rhizome can change our conception of history as being linear, or moving onward over time. Different histories move at different speeds, sometimes progressing in some ways and sometimes freezing. There are also aspects of chance, which govern the manner in which the rhizome might branch out in a non-hierarchical way. In this sense, the rhizome is most similar to the process of thinking, since thoughts shoot off rhizomatically in different directions, and since memory is also thinking; thus, memory is a rhizome. Memory is but combining past and present in a non-linear structure; in a way, memories are different personal histories going forward at some points and freezing at others. When memory goes ahead of its present time and when it freezes, it is linked to the past and to places and people. This idea of the irregular fusion of time, place, people, and memories is presented in Halaby's *West of The Jordan*:

The house tells stories of courage and sadness and joy in every season, and now they come back to you at the wrong time, at the right time, at times that make you hate where you live, or love it more than you can make your words describe. (p. 2)

The rhizomatic characteristic of memory and time is obvious in being a movement forward and backward in time with no linearity in different directions as a memory pops up illogically and unreasonably. Moreover, Hala in the first part says that her father can see the memories of her mother in her eyes; i.e., from a multiplicity of disturbed emotions, memory emerged in a concrete sense, "I loved your mother," Hala's father says, then Hala adds, "perhaps seeing my memory"; "the memory comes in my eyes, burning like the sun that is setting" (p. 13).

The episodic structure of the novel aims at highlighting the individuality of experience in each character. Each single story remarkably highlights the dilemma of the identity of the four females within an Arab and Arab American cultural milieu. Mawal comments on her villagers saying, "but mostly everyone one else is like rice without enough salt, who you only remember because you see them every day, and not like the hot pepper ones, who you remember because of the burn they leave" (p. 22); i.e., the villagers share the common birthplace, community teachings and tradition; only

some minority tend to develop special individualistic traits that distinguish them from the rest; those minorities are the rhizomatic characters.

The first voice that the reader hears in the novel is Hala's. The four female characters of *West of The Jordan* are equally substantial in their pursuit of gender, exile and diaspora issues in novel. Through their relationships, especially maternal ones, they all uncover several features of the diasporic experience in America. However, Hala is the most successful of all as she managed to maintain a balanced standpoint between the two poles of her existence. She could be rightly categorized as true a hybrid individual; in other words, she is actually both Arab and American equally. However, some personal arenas where Hala was unable to attain perfect balance remain because she was primarily displaced and somehow tortured by the death of her mother.

After the passing of her mother and upon her return home, Hala finds it difficult to authenticate her Arab American identity as she faces her father who informs her that he does not wish her to return back to America to pursue her university degree there. Hala declares that, "[w]hile she [Hala's 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." On his repeated saying, "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." Hala begins to imagine her existence in Jordan as "to rot"-- the very term her late mother described her own existence. Latifa, Hala's eldest sister, thought "I was to replace my mother with a husband. I was to stay in Jordan forever. Marry [...]. Have children. Be someone else's burden." This decision would force her to stay in Jordan and follow the conventional Arab codes of feminine role; however, Hala rebels. At this point, Hala's American identity prevails: "Maybe I spoke because I had learned to move my tongue like an American. Maybe it was just my grief that made me lose control. Or anger. 'I am going back with Hamdi and Fay' "(p. 45). Hala's father also witnesses a drastic change in his attitudes: instead of being a traditional Arab father who is merely anxious about his family's honor, to being a new understanding father caring about the wishes of his daughter, as he acquiesced in his daughter's desire and let her go.

This is typically reminiscent of *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir (2009). The book is preoccupied with the recognition of the vast differences between the interests of the two sexes and its attack on men's biological, economic, and psychological discrimination against women. Simone de Beauvoir mentions how male domination is not inherent or fated but conditioned at every stage of development. She claims that "Man learns his power." Hala's father is exemplary of the males referred to by de Beauvoir; he experiences a shift of power and domination as his daughter experiences empowerment and gains a voice. Hala could voice out her desires out of anger or out of sadness; yet, she found a voice for herself.

In his book, Stuart Hall (1996) investigates how important it is for an individual to question, understand, and adopt his identity. He provides theoretical and substantive insights into the human identity contemporary manifestations. Without privileging anyone's approach to problems accompanying the formation of identity, Hall raises a number of significant questions and offers insights into different approaches to understanding identity. In doing so, he both illuminates and advances debates about identity. In this context, Hall's concepts provide a better understanding of Arab Americans as a cluster of identities with different cultural backgrounds; one can never tell which side of identity will take over and when. When Hala spoke out of anger, the ability to express anger means power. In this case, her American identity took over in the sense she was able to fight for her rights much against the will of her father. But if she spoke out of sadness and despair, this could have been her Arab identity coming to the surface. In other words, if Hala felt defeated and desperate and she spoke out of her hopelessness, she still advocates a weaker perspective of herself as she was not able to perceive that it was her right to say "no." However, in due course, she was able to find a voice.

The second character is Mawal; she is the cousin of Hala, Soraya, and Khadija. "Mawal has never left her motherland; Palestine, yet, she feels alienated by the pressure of political and intellectual occupation of Palestine by the Jewish forces" observes Zbidi, 2014,p.450). In *West of the Jordan*, there are thirty-seven stories: only seven of which are recounted by Mawal. Those stories communicate significant sequences in the lives of the characters as well as other Palestinians. 'Nawara,' in part one, introduces her Palestinian heritage underlining the significance of places in one's identity. The reader becomes acquainted with facts about Mawal's village through the detailed visual descriptions she provides. She even employs transliteration in order to make it easier for non-Arabic speakers to comprehend the context she is relating (Zbidi, 2014, p. 451). Mawal says "our village is called Nawara, which means flowers or blossoms. When you say it, Nawa-waara..." (p. 15). Through her depiction "of the lives of different generations of Palestinian women including, her mother and her grandmother, Mawal creates a mosaic echoing the diversity and the richness of cultural and social history surrounding Palestinian women" (Zbidi, 2014, p. 451).

The stories Mawal narrates in her narratives are selected from her memory. She contextualizes striking personal moments that exemplify and embody a plain depiction of the intolerable history of Palestinians women. However, those peculiar stories also reproduce Mawal's own emotional state of anxiety and dislocation, even in her very homeland. Those stories depict tormented women enduring various kinds of physical, social, and political subjugations and detentions (Zbidi, 2014, p. 451). Among the stories told by the female narrators is "Crossing" where she recounts the story of a Palestinian woman who had been living in Puerto Rico and then chose to return to her homeland Jenin because she doubts "how [she] can let her children grow up in a place where girls are women at eleven years old" (p.

52). Mawal claims, that as life under the Israeli occupation gets harder," fathers are willing to release their daughters to a different world," Farah was one of these "released daughters." In describing Farah, Mawal says, "her voice is thick as she spills her sadness..." (p. 47); Farah's misery climaxes in the scene where she was inspected before crossing the boundaries into her hometown: "Women guards poked around with rubber gloves and Farah felt nothing—no anger, nothing more than tiredness" (p. 49).

Investigating Mawal's stories, we understand the antiquity of Palestinian women. It is essential to distinguish that the history of the suppression of Arab women still marks the lives of those women who inhabit the Arab world. Undeniably, Mawal's sense of displacement and un-belonging is mostly because of the severe social, historical and political conditions of women in Palestine. The fact that their own territories are occupied by the Israelis had turned their lives into distasteful, restrained, and under everlasting hazard. Halaby's novel, *West of the Jordan* does not depict a full portrait of Mawal's character and individuality, with regard to the other three character/narrators in the story. However, she sustains a central mission as the storytelling of the other women's dislocation.

In *Fragmented Selves: Temporality and Identity in Borderline Personality Disorder*, Thomas Fuchs asserts how the subject is unable to hold an experience or stable sense of self when impacted by past experiences. Fuchs's *Fragmentation* may be hypothesized as a lack of "narrative identity" which implies a continuity of the personal past, present and future. This is typical of Halaby's Mawal: "The human identity is essentially based on the capacity of persons to integrate contradictory aspects and tendencies into a coherent, overarching sense and view of themselves for one's self" (Fuchs, 2007, p. 179). In other words, although she does not possess a distinct identity of herself, in her projection of the Other, her identity is partly formed.

The third cousin is Soraya who lives in Los Angeles and is aware of her condition as one who does not entirely belong in either culture. Her father does not seem to have control over his family. His mere source of power comes from the money he earns from his business. Soraya declares: "[m]y mother is the strong one in our house and people would probably make fun of my father if it weren't for all the money he has . . . So men respect him because of his success" (p. 26).

As Zbidi (2014) observes, Soraya's father could be considered as representative of the transformation in the established deep-rooted Arab ideals for immigrants in America. He represents a vast alteration from the conservative worth of fatherhood that is pervasive in the Arab world. Instead, he has achieved the American dream of financial success, yet, he has abandoned his Arab father's duties leaving his daughter to the unethical practices of Western society (Zbidi, 2014, p. 449).

Soraya experiences a course of self-inflicted sense of dislocation, in the sense that she is unable to locate herself in any of her heritages (the Arab or the American one). She is torn between her desire to follow her own wishes and to express herself in her own way, on the one hand. On the other hand, she challenges her parent's conservative ethics and yearns for the American way of self-assertion and independence. In this sense, she finds pleasure away from the chains and restraints forced on her at home. Soraya embarks on a deep sense of displacement. She exists within two disparate cultures and fails to establish herself as a component of either one. Soraya leads a double life where she has no distinct space of her own.

In this sense, Edward Said (1978) began studying the cultural struggles of Arab people in exile; he explored the relationship between the Enlightenment, which reinforced much of western high culture and philosophy, and colonialism. This led to the publication of his most influential book, *Orientalism*, which enticed the western world to reexamine their perception of the Islamic world. In Halaby's novel, much of what the second-generation knew of their heritage was focused on village life and its folklore. The majority of the immigrants knew little about the great-Arab Islamic contributions to civilization. Accordingly, second and third generations of Arab Americans exhibited minor attention to their ethnic backgrounds. In this sense, Zbidi (2014) observes that "Soraya abhors compliance and communicates her offense and rebellion against her mother and her Arab culture through the act of dancing-- something that her family often criticizes her for as they only care for the family image. Soraya employs dancing to release her unfulfilled aspirations and to escape from her displacement in a world of cultural clashes" (p.450). In other words, while struggling to achieve her own desires in a land of freedom, Soraya has to obey her parents' traditions; she often disgraces them and satisfies her desires opposite to what Arab ethics dictate. In her story "Fire," she admits:

This year I told my family a thousand and one lies and went to disco and danced for a beautiful man who came to love me, love me so much that I carried his credit card, wore his jewelry, and had lunch with him until I satisfied him in every way. (pp. 28-29)

Soraya fully admits the unethical conduct of her practices and that it is completely denounced in her mother's culture, yet she resorts to it in a sense of self-revenge; she both hates herself for doing so and then tortures herself again by committing it perpetually. In this respect, Hall offers his deconstructionist approach; it is a re-conceptualization of identity as a dynamic process of continual identification. Hall believes that identification is always either an over-appropriation or an under-appropriation, never a complete appropriation; this is Soraya's case; she is never fully appropriated to the same American society, which on a surface level, she seems to adore.

The fourth narrator is Khadija, the cousin of Hala, Mawal and Soraya. Her first story "Sand and Fire" introduces some of the outlines that form Khadija's manners and inform her awareness of the world around her. As Zbidi (2014) notes, Khadija starts by providing a positive comment on the origin of her name by penetrating into its Islamic roots.

She says, "in Islam, Khadija was the Prophet Muhammad's wife. She was much older than he was and had a lot of money. He was said to have loved her very much." She accentuates the extent of reverence and love that encircled the life of the prophet's wife. However, Khadija, then, underlines the ugly reality of her Arabic name in America: "In America my name sounds like someone throwing up or falling off a bicycle. If they can get the first part of it right, the Kha' part, it comes out like clearing your throat after eating ice cream" (p. 36).

Zbidi (2014) further argues that Khadija is aware of the misinterpretation that the contrast between her Arabic name and her white features are likely to prompt in the minds of her American friends and teachers. She mainly has to withstand her father's offensiveness and irresponsibility, which he attributes to his unsuccessful American dream (p.447). Khadija remarks that her father "has many dreams that have been filled with sand. That's what he tells me: 'This country has taken my dreams that used to float like those giant balloons, and filled them with sand. Now they don't float, and you can't even see what they are anymore.'" Khadija's father, who works as a part-time mechanic, is an alcoholic. He believes that the majority of immigrants who immigrate to global cities are disturbed and that their ability to support themselves and their families is so inadequate in their homeland that they may resort to migration as the only resolution. Khadija's father is infrequently physically abusive to her; however, in a way, he is not a stable character, he wavers between being aggressive and being kind; as Khadija says: "sometimes my father loves my mother –and the rest of us– so much that he becomes a kissing and hugging machine. Sometimes, though, he is an angry machine that sees suspicious moves in every breath" (p. 37).

Therefore, Zbidi (2014) concludes that the behavior of Khadija's father is associated with his depression and his nostalgia for his homeland (p. 447). Khadija argues: "[m]y ache comes from losing my home,' my father tells us a lot" (p. 39), and "[t]hat evening my father started talking about the sand that filled his dreams again. 'How could you not be a little crazy when you have watched your dreams be buried the way I have?'" Khadija describes her grandfather saying: "Siddi has been staying with us for a while. He is very old and sometimes smells of going to the bathroom" (p. 192). While heavily drunk, Khadija's father's offensiveness culminates, when he harassed both his father and baby son. Khadija narrates:

Baba sets on fire and I'm in the kitchen trying to be invisible and slap Sidi slap and the baby cries, so I go to see and Hamouda's arm is in my father's teeth and blood and then Siddi comes up to hold my father or take the baby from him, and my father hits him hard, his own father, and knocks him to the floor and then goes back to the baby who is just crying and crying and crying. (p. 207)

Khadija was brave enough to act: "I do what I have never done. I run to the phone and dial 911 like they say to do in school" (p. 207). The moment Khadija remembers what they say in school, she is being American; i.e., she is identifying with her own American side; this act of identification quickly saved the situation. Once the police came to find the father lying over the baby son, the fire was put out; the father's anger washed away: "my father's fire just goes away, like it started raining inside him and he lets them take him" says Khadija. Khadija starts to remember her double identity, asking herself what would happen when the mother came home to find Khadija responsible for arresting her father. However, instantly, Khadija returns to her quietness, she narrates, "I close my eyes tight and imagine she's here. 'It's okay, little cucumber, ' I whisper in English in Hamouda's ear. 'We'll be okay. We'll be okay, God willing'" (p. 208). The last sentences epitomize her hybridity: she comforts her baby brother, and herself before him, that they will be okay, but never forgot to proceed her self-assertion statements with "God Willing."

The fathers of the four female narrators play a crucial role in the narrative as well. In her article, "The Representation of fatherhood by the Arab Diaspora in the United States," Marta Bosch (2008) argues that "in Laila Halaby's *West of the Jordan* there is a varied account of fathers, from strict and abusive, through careless, to a father that starts being traditional but learns to open his mind" (p. 101). She terms Arab masculinity as an "especially hybrid and contradictory type of masculinity". While Arab masculinity mainly refers to conventional patriarchal values, it also "allows liberal practices that contradict those traditional discourses". Daniel Monterescu asserts that, as a result of these ambivalences, Arab masculinity is a "situational masculinity" which is an outcome of a mixture of discourses and so it is in a liminal position. He perceives Arab masculinity as a "location which lies between Islamic masculinity (characterized by its conservatism) and the liberal-secular masculinity that is also developing in the Arab world (characterized by its tendencies toward modernity and Westernism)" (2006, p. 123).

The argument exemplifies Homi Bhabha's view in his *Location of Culture* (2004), where he proposes that the individual can employ a mixture of cultures to construct his identity. Bhabha points out that society operates as a mirror capable of showing the subject images of "selves" that it deems respectable (p. 102). Bhabha uses concepts such as mimicry, interstice, hybridity and liminality, which are all influenced by semiotics and Lacanian psychoanalysis; emphasizing that "cultural production is always most productive where it is most ambivalent" (p. 23). Bhabha's view perfectly matches what Monterescu calls "situational masculinity" where the hybrid man occupies the liminal space between his traditional ancestors and the culture of the new world. He is being showed "images of himself" by the society each at a time according to the urgency of the situation (p. 124).

In light of the ambivalent position of fathers in the land of exile, Hala's father stands in uniqueness as a perfect example of "situational masculinity," being able to shape and reshape according to the necessity of the situation. An example is when he changed his mind concerning Hala's desire to pursue her education, yielding to the desire of his daughter. Hala's father undertakes a massive change as the story develops, from being an old-fashioned father only

concerned about his family's reputation and not her daughter's desires, to being open-minded, and understanding of his daughter's needs. By the end of the novel, when Hala returns to the United States, she has acknowledged the importance of her ancestries, and decides to wear a roza, the typical Jordanian embroidered dress; in the meantime, her father realizes the existence of other modern cultures that entails that she wears jeans (p. 203).

Khadija's father is set in clear contrast to Hala's father. He is the drunkard who justifies his aggressive attitude to the failure of achieving his dreams: "This country has taken my dreams that used to float like those giant balloons, and filled them with sand. Now they don't float, and you can't even see what they are anymore." However, he is not a flat character, but is labeled as existing in an "ambivalent" position, where he can be both good and bad; in other words, he is exemplary to "situational masculinity." As Khadija says, "[s]ometimes my father loves my mother –and the rest of us– [...] Sometimes, though, he is an angry machine that sees suspicious moves in every breath. But most of the time he is sad, his thoughts somewhere I cannot visit" (p. 37). Occupying the liminal space of ambivalence alongside a natural tendency towards depression and frustration, Khadija's father becomes a character fluctuating between good and bad and almost always resorts to aggression.

As Soraya is the opposite of Khadija, her father is the exact opposite of Khadija's father. Soraya's father is a disempowered man, who does not hold responsibility for his family and whose only power comes from money, as Soraya puts it: "Money is his favorite thing, like somewhere along the way he decided he could only focus on one thing and he thought better money than family, less headaches. So, men respect him because of his success" (p. 26). Soraya's father has altered traditional Arab standards for traditional American ideals... Khadija's father was primarily concerned with her behavior and reputation and was a failure in making money; Soraya's father was successful in money-making indifferent to Arab traditions and morals. In short, the "situational masculinity" has been altered for both, i.e., they both are exposed to the same ambivalence, but they chose to react differently in two opposite ways.

Finally, Mawal's father is hardly visible in the text, but in the few occurrences where he shows up, he seems a gentle father. Mawal lives in Nawara, Palestine with her family, and she is very involved with them and their customs, and so there are no clashes between Mawal and her father. Mawal wants to become a teacher in Palestine if her parents agree. She is sheltered in her traditional life, and her father understands her needs. Neither Mawal nor her father is exposed to the ambivalent space; they are flat stereotypes.

In an interview with Laila Halaby, she was asked about what her four main characters have learned by the end of the novel and how they have they grown throughout the course of their narratives. Halaby answered:

Each one has had to deal with a blow to her security blanket, which has in turn launched her into adulthood or at least into accepting responsibility, or ownership, for where she is in life. Each one has learned about herself and her history and has had to come to terms with it a bit more. (Beacon Press, 2003)

Each of the four main characters has to come of age in a different way, accepting herself and her surroundings, and in this very development of characters emerges the rhizomatic factors. In response to the question of which character their creator favors, Halaby says that she does not favor one over the other, "They each have such a handful to deal with and have to react to circumstances beyond their control rather than creating the circumstances themselves." Halaby adds that Soraya is aware of herself sexually and does not think that Soraya tries to rebel because she is "just different fundamentally, straight from the factory." Halaby goes on to say that she sees Mawal as contented with her life which is by far safer than the experiences of her cousins. Halaby remarks that it is very "important to understand that in spite of occupation, in spite of all the problems, she is secure in herself and her family and her life. She sees her family functioning in a traditional, predictable way; she will not deviate from that because there is no reason to. Halaby expresses her view of Khadija saying that she is caught between "what is awaited of her by her family, and by her school world." Unlike Soraya, however, "she is not proud of who she is, cannot relate on a fundamental level, and is therefore alienated." Finally, Halaby adds, Hala has the greatest ability to manage her life. "Like Soraya and Khadija, Hala is something of an "other," and she too comes to terms with that over the course of the book" (Beacon Press, 2003).

### III. CONCLUSION

The four main characters have been investigated in terms of their adaptability to their circumstances; Hala, Mawal, Soraya and Khadija have proved to exhibit variable degrees of the rhizomatic characteristics. Thus, according to Bhabha (2004), "the theoretical recognition of the split- space of enunciation may open the way to conceptualizing an international culture based not on the exoticism of culturalism and multiculturalism or the diversity of cultures, but rather on the inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity" (p. 57). The international rhizomatic cultural identity is one that comes from the full integration and embracement of hybridity. Applying Bhabha's previous concepts to the four protagonists, it fair to conclude that Hala is highly rhizomatic in managing to keep both her Arab and American identity reconciled in her; each side of her identity seems to take over, one at a time when necessity arises. Hala and her father are rhizomatic characters who are able to act according to the necessity of the situation; hence, they are flexible and re-shapeable just like rhizomes. Hala and her father fulfill the aspects of efficiency in the rhizome, employing the aspects of chance which governs the manner in which the rhizome might branch out in a non-hierarchical fashion. In this sense, the rhizome becomes most akin to the process of thinking, since thoughts shoot off rhizomatically in different directions, and this is also verified by the father and his daughter.

Mawal, on the other hand, is not rhizomatic at all; she is deeply integrated into her motherland traditions as she has never been away from her homeland either physically or even intellectually. Mawal, like her father, are stereotypes of flat characters linked to their hometown, and hence, centered and hierarchical, whereas rhizomatic characters are mainly decentered and non-hierarchical.

Soraya and Khadija are both partly rhizomatic in the sense that full reconciliation has not been accomplished within their inner self. In other words, although Soraya seems to represent the liberal woman affected by her American context, deep inside she is not satisfied with what she is doing, and in being not heartily satisfied, she is linked to her center-- to her Arab origin. On the other hand, Soraya's father is highly rhizomatic; he has come up with a totally different identity from his ancestors, altering their morals and ideals and adopting a new system of beliefs. Apart from being non-hierarchical and decentered, Soraya's father has altered his aboriginal history: he conforms to the rhizomatic character that can replace our conception of history as being linear and singular, or moving forward or upward across time; he is manipulative and ready to scheme the surface of society in whatever ways which allow him to survive.

Finally, Khadija has exhibited a new birth of identity at a critical time, favoring the general welfare of the family over the traditional subjugated attitude she used to take in, for the fear that she might outrage the beliefs of her people. Thus, the rhizomatic transformation has taken part at this very final act of Khadija. Critics have emphasized the utility of intuition and immediate experience as the prime faculties through which we should aim at understanding the world. It is important that one should ontologically anchor himself or herself in a transcendent principle or idea, preferably one that can allow us to perceive our existence as fluid and constantly evolving. Khadija's final courageous act is proof of this. She was able to employ the "utility of intuition" when she called the police for her father. She was able to save her grandfather and her baby brother by acting according to the demands of the immediate situation. However, it is hard to categorize the fluctuating character of her father, who is, most of the time, abusive and aggressive to his family attributing his aggression to despair and disappointment. Yet, at other times, he becomes a loving father and a caring husband.

Hala and Khadija are dynamic rhizomatic characters capable of molding themselves and manipulating their circumstances. Soraya, on the other hand, has grown quite away from her roots; although she kept an eye on them, she is very different; passive and static; she knows she has done wrong and blames her own self, but never is willing to change. Mawal is a positive non-rhizomatic character; although she is incapable of change, she remains an ideal indigenous character preserving her native identity and securing it. Indeed, Halaby's characters are true to life examples of the Arab American characters who are striving to locate themselves within the American culture.

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