Racing Sheherazade: Arab-American Women's Translations of Sheherazade in Writing and Performance

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Abstract

This dissertation contributes to the burgeoning field of Arab-American Studies, through an exploration of the revival of the narrative and orality of the narrator of *The Thousand and One Nights*, Sheherazade, in Arab-American women's writing and performance. The study traverses the junction of Orientalist and stereotypical racial discourses, with which Arab-American women writers and performers contend, as members of the Arab diaspora. Consequently, in this race over representation these women are interpellated in a race over race, as they confront and subvert prevalent representations of themselves and their culture. This rac(ing) is further complicated by its being shaped against the backdrop of the Iraqi war, the "war on terror" and hostility against Arabs, Muslims and Arab-Americans post 9/11. Historically, the "oriental" woman has represented a particularly contested terrain in representations of the "Other"; she is translated as the space upon which many prejudices and preconceptions about the East are mapped out. Contemporary Arab-American women writers and performers recast Sheherazade's narrative and orality in an attempt to negotiate their affiliations.

In an introduction and four chapters, this study addresses the following questions: how do genres such as the novel, poetry and performances - like one woman shows and Stand-up - negotiate affiliations in the current polarized and historical moment? How do Arab-American women writers and performers recast Sheherazade and how is recasting troubled by the exoticized/oppressed representations of Arab and Muslim women in early translations of the frame tale of *The Nights* and American popular culture? Through close readings and critical analyses of texts and performances, I argue that writers like Diana Abu-Jaber and Mohja Kahf and performers like Laila Farah and Maysoon Zayid offer a

productive examination of identities and representations, forging a location for cultural translation through their writings and performances. The study explores how the Sheherazadian narrative is adapted to cultural translation in *Crescent*, and *E-Mails from Scheherazad.* In *Living in the Hyphen-Nation* and Maysoon Zayid's Stand-up comedy routine, Sheherazadian orality is analyzed as a conduit for cultural negotiations. Through novel, poetry, one woman shows and Stand-up comedy, these artists reshape their identities in relation to a dispersed spectrum of Arab-American identitie(s), opening up rigid categories of collective identity, so that Sheherazade inhabits twenty-first century America.

Keywords: Arab-American Literature; Arab-American Women's Writing; Arab-American Women's performance; Cultural Translation; Race Studies; Diaspora Studies; Performance; Cultural Studies; Diasporic Identities; One Thousand and One Nights; Arabian Nights; Sheherazade; Storytelling; Diana Abu-Jaber; Mohja Kahf; Maysoon Zayid; Laila Farah; Fashion and Identity; Food and Identity; Stand-up comedy; One woman shows; 9/11; Arab Diaspora; Narrative; Orality.

To Walid, Nouran, and Roaa

Where we live in the world

is never one place. Our hearts,

those dogged mirrors, keep flashing us

moons before we are ready for them.

– Naomi Shihab Nye, "My grandmother in the Stars" *19 Varieties of Gazelle*

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Introduction

"In-Processing" Sheherazade in the West: "Sheherazadian narrative" as a *Dihliz* in the Diaspora

The hyphen for Arab-American women writers and performers is currently a particularly contested zone due to a resurgence of Orientalist and stereotypical racial discourses on Arabs. This racing is further complicated by its being shaped against the backdrop of the Iraqi war, the "war on terror" and hostility against Arabs, Muslims, and Arab-Americans post 9/11.[1] In referring to Arab-American women writers and performers, then, one is aware of the contention surrounding the term "Arab" since it suggests a constructed unity that in reality crosses multiple, geographical, and social boundaries. The term Arab refers to a diverse group of people of varied languages, religions, ethnicities, and national identifications. The aim of this study is to assay the cultural productions of Arab-American women writers and performers, discerning attempts to refashion collective cultural productions like *The Thousand and One Nights*. Recasting of the frame narrative of *The Nights* does not merely commemorate, but also questions the politics involved in translating collective cultural productions. I consciously make the choice to refer to the writers and performers in this study as Arabs, because of my governing concern with their reinterpretation of *The Thousand and One Nights* as a

[1] According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 3.5 million Americans are of Arab descent. See *Arab-American Institute Website*. Though they represent a considerably small population, they have become a highly visible group as a result of 9/11 and the current war in Iraq.

cultural production of the Arabic language.[2] However, with some writers in this study, like Mohja Kahf and Maysoon Zayid who foreground their Muslim identity, my terminology changes accordingly to convey a different prioritization of the correlatives shaping their Arab-American identities.[3] In view of the above, the main concerns of this study revolve around the politics shaping representation.

Recently, the London Tate Museum's 2008 Symposium "Orientalism Revisited: Art and the Politics of Representation" has revived key questions regarding art, politics and representation from the nineteenth century to the present moment. In the introduction to the Symposium's catalogue and her essay in the anthology on the exhibition, Rana Kaabani questions the celebratory manner of Orientalist art exhibitions. In this move, she relates the past of Orientalism with its resurgent present, foregrounding the irony involved in the resurrection of the artistic remains of a colonial age which referred to the nineteenth century occupation of Egypt as an act of civilization. She also calls into

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[2] Accordingly, my justification for the use of the term "Arab" in relation to the diaspora writers in this study lies in their immersion in the cultural aspects of this language. This is despite their actual varied fluency in the Arabic language.

[3] The term "Muslim" will play a governing role in shaping identity positions in this study, since all the writers and performers here designate Islam as a significant feature shaping their identities. However, some allocate it a more prominent position in their negotiation of identities than others. Interestingly, the stereotypes of the silent and oppressed Muslim woman and violent Islam have become, through what Edward Said refers to as "power of citation," a means to demonize those of Arab descent. Stereotyping works through generalization and reductionism; this is why sometimes all Arabs are assumed to be Muslims.

question the present resuscitation of Orientalism, "in the imperialist spin that, at least initially, accompanied the Anglo-American action in Iraq;" she raises the key question, "[i]f the British military occupation of Egypt inspired some of the striking paintings in this exhibition, what images might future generations retain of the present-day occupation of Iraq" ("Regarding Orientalist" 40). The fact that the Tate museum chose to revisit this topic as recently as 2008 demonstrates the validity of reconsidering Orientalism, in relation to current vital issues shaping our globalized world such as race and diaspora. The "Oriental" woman has always represented a particularly contested terrain in relation to colonialism. She has been the space upon which many prejudices and preconceptions about the East have been mapped out; Orientalist paintings testify to this. The literary writings and performances of contemporary Arab-American women have become an arena of resistance to such Orientalist discursive practices, because of the contested nature of these women's relations to affiliation and the American nation in the current political and historical moment. As a study of the self-representations of Arabs then, this study focuses upon the resistant representations forged by Arab-American women, touching upon the political and cultural representations with which they contend. Accordingly, the writers and performers in this study, Diana Abu-Jaber, Mohja Kahf, Laila Farah, and Maysoon Zayid explore the tensions governing affiliations to nation, the problems shaping markers of collective identity, and the outlines of race-thinking molding their lives.[4]

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[4] I borrow the term race-thinking from Sherene Razack as she contextualizes it to post-"war on terror" rhetoric to be the routinization of racial hierarchy without requiring individual actors. It is founded on the idea that "modern enlightened, secular peoples must protect themselves from pre-

Through novel, poetry, one woman shows and stand-up comedy, these artists adjust the "Sheherazadian narrative" and its "orality" to tell their stories in relation to a dispersed spectrum of Arab-American identities. They, hence, open up rigid categories of collective identity. They translate their experiences in the diaspora, by drawing upon collective cultural narratives like the frame tale of *One Thousand and One Nights*. This frame tale is reappropriated by Arab-American women writers and performers as "Sheherazadian narrative" and "Sheherazadian orality." I will be using these two terms throughout this study. In fact, it is one of the purposes of this study to chart the outlines of these two terms.[5] In the diasporic context, "Sheherazadian narrative" refers to a narrative which resists stereotypical and exotic representations through reformation of the frame tale of *The Thousand and One Nights* or the invocation of its orality. An understanding of why these Arab-American women are resisting their representations and translations into

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modern, religious peoples whose loyalty to tribe and community reigns over their commitment to the rule of law [...] Significantly, because *they* have not advanced as we have, it is our moral obligation to correct, discipline, and keep them in line and to defend ourselves against their irrational excesses" (8-11).

[5] Muhsin Al-Musawi refers to the liminal nature of Sheherazade's narrative saying, "Scheherazade plays on limits and frontiers, but her narrative technique has the poetics and politics of the threshold. It is neither a termination nor a start, but a deliberate manipulation of means to delay authoritarianism as practice while establishing a counter culture of great diversity and richness" (4). I would like to develop this description further by arguing that what I refer to as the "Sheherazadian narrative" in Arab-American women's writing and performance does not merely delay authoritarianism, but rather engages with it to give a glimpse of possible new realities where the complexity of diasporic experience can be voiced and explored.

mainstream American culture, through their writings and performance is intricately linked with earlier translations of their culture and lives, shaped by an older Orientalism dating back to the nineteenth-century. Such Orientalist representations continue to configure their lives and representations to this day.

These women resist attempts to fix their identities through the revival of the narrative techniques of the storyteller of *The Arabian Nights,* Sheherazade, to depict a process whereby the individual is constantly processing new experiences and representations in the new homeland and attempting to correlate and understand them in the context of an "Other" homeland, creating something similar to what W.E.B. Dubois refers to as double consciousness (4). However, in Arab-American women's writing and performance this process becomes more pertinent because of its subversion of the binary paradigms shaping the post 9/11 political climate. Camp mentalities fuel polarized struggles between Arab and American affiliations, which create contested narratives in these writings and performances that beg further exploration. Through a study of how different Arab-American women writers and performers re-voice the power politics of the frame tale of *One Thousand and One Nights* to resist resurging Orientalism and the increasing routinization of racial distinctions, the cultural and racial tensions in these women's writings and performances become increasingly evident. Through a variety of little known texts and rising provocative performers, Sheherazade inhabits the streets of twenty-first century America. Her words and experiences shape the resistances which this study seeks to explore, through a deconstruction of Arab-American women's writings and performances in a social and cultural context, measuring out the degree to which they

challenge or subscribe to past and prevailing exotic/oppressed "Oriental" women's representations.

A Diasporic *Dihliz*: Narratives that Link Us and Spaces Where We Mingle

In concentrating upon the "Sheherazadian narrative" and "orality" in Arab-American women's writing and performances, my aim is to explore how these women negotiate their identities and affiliations through narrative as a mode of knowledge.[6] Such cultural narratives are central because they become the means through which our identities and affiliations are framed, defining how we are known and how we know ourselves. Consequently, it is these narratives which eventually shape action in our societies.[7] Kwame Anthony Appiah's discussion of the prominence of narrative as a translational and cultural linking device is particularly pertinent to the significance of narrative in the diasporic writings and performances of the women in this study. Appiah postulates that a cultural translation, which is unhampered by power politics, can become possible:

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[6] Paul Gilroy explains the processual nature of negotiating identity pointing out, "individual identity, the counterpart to the collective is constantly negotiated, cultivated and protected as a source of pleasure, power, wealth, and potential danger" (106).

[7] One must point out though that Sheherazade's contemporary introduction into diaspora literature written and performed by Arab-American women is by no means a novelty in American literature. Edgar Allen Poe and John Barth both invited the masterful storyteller into their narratives *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor* by John Barth and Edgar Allen Poe's short story "The Thousand-and-Second Tale of Sheherazade."

> A different human capacity that grounds our sharing: namely, the grasp of a narrative logic that allows us to construct the world to which our imaginations respond [...] the basic human capacity to grasp stories, even strange stories, is also what links us, powerfully, to others, even strange others. (*The Ethics* 257)

In the importance of this "human capacity to grasp stories" lies the urgency in exploring Sheherazadian narrative as a diasporic narrative, shaping Arab-American women's worlds. As a diasporic narrative, it explores the complexities of negotiating their actual lives in contrast to mainstream representations of themselves. In this sense, narrative in these women's cultural productions occupies a conceptual space that is best described by the Arab Medieval scholar Abu Hamid al-Ghazali as a *dihliz*.[8] Through this *dihliz* metaphor, I wish to investigate how these women relate the experiences of their daily

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[8] This is originally a Persian word which has been Arabized. Ebrahim Moosa points out that Abu-Hamid Al-Ghazali, the fourteenth century jurist, scholar and polymath used this spatial metaphor in his writing to explore the means to knowledge referring to the threshold space between the door and the house. As an intermediate space it is a space where what is outside and what is inside meet. He argues that Al-Ghazali intellectually celebrates and prefers this space as one where political enunciation becomes possible, due to non-totalitarian modes of being and thought thriving in this space. This is not a space of tension or conflict, but negotiation "[u]nlike a border that serves as a territorial demarcation between sovereign territories and criminalizes improper crossing without authorization, the *dihliz* is not a criminalizing space but a welcoming space" (Moosa 48). Hence, home as a *dihliz* becomes conceptual space that we pass, where unlike a boundary we can linger and ruminate.

lives and negotiate different cultural currents. Through this conceptual space, these women use the *dihliz* as a space of cultural production. In it, the material objects of their everyday experiences such as food, fashion, and performance are shaped to express their cultural negotiations in the diaspora.

The *dihliz* then becomes a very pertinent term for an analysis of the Arab-American diaspora, since as a metaphor it holds within it a key aspect of living in the diaspora which is the negotiation of the different spaces of our experiences. As a "non-totalitarian" threshold space, the concept of the *dihliz* allows for an understanding of diaspora as an experience, where the many lives we have lived and are living can intermingle. It is important to point out though that our experience of places does not exist in the void, but is always defined by socioeconomic conditions, politics, and power. Accordingly, the Arab-American diasporic experience is a *dihlizian* space where various material, political, social, and economic conditions are negotiated, opening up the Arab-American diasporic experience to a multitude of possible positionalities. The Arab-American women writers and performers in this study reflect these various political and social positionalities. Diana Abu-Jaber is a second generation Arab-American, with an immigrant Jordanian father. Mohja Kahf is a first generation Arab-American, who was born in Damascus, Syria and came to the U.S. as a child. Laila Farah is also a first generation Arab-American who has lived her life between Lebanon and the U.S. Maysoon Zayid is a Palestinian Arab-American, whose parents emigrated from Palestine to New Jersey. Despite their varied diasporic positions, their resistance to the reductive racial, gendered, and cultural stereotypes ascribed to Arabs and Muslims is what unites them. Through Sheherazadian narrative and its orality, they reappropriate Sheherazade's

empowered status in Arabic culture, resisting mainstream representations of themselves and their Arab and Muslim culture. However, it is important to point out, that these women writers and performers in the diaspora are not the first to attempt to revive Sheherazade's narrative.

Arab Women's Writing Tradition and Sheherazade

Well-known women writers writing from the Arab world have also gone back to Sheherazade, the storytelling figure, as a source of inspiration, reviving her narrative techniques in their writing: Nawal Al-Sa'dawi's *The Fall of the Imam* (1988), Assia Djebar's *A Sister to Scheherazade* (1993) and Fatema Mernessi's *Dreams of Trespass* (1994). These texts have become classics and representative texts in Women's Studies and Middle East Studies courses particularly in the West. In them, the "Sheherazadian narrative" is one narrative that resists patriarchal traditions and colonialist domination, in varying degrees. Feminist scholars have also written extensively on the significance of the frame narrative of *One Thousand and One Nights* (1885) and its relation to liberation, desire, and resistance.[9] Suzanne Gauch, in *Liberating Shahrazad* (2007), discusses how Arab women writers of the Maghreb redefine the figure of Sheherazade as one of resistance, foregrounding Sheherazade's storytelling as a liberating active agency. Ferial Ghazoul, in *Nocturnal Poetics* (1996) dwells upon the empowerment of Sheherazade's role through her inversion of her relation to her master/Shahriyar. Fedwa Malti-Douglas, in *Woman's Body, Woman's Word* (1991) analyzes Sheherazade's control of the

[9] I am referring here to Richard Burton's translation of *The Nights* which is considered by many to be the most widespread translation of *The Nights*.

relationship between text and desire, exploring Sheherazade's empowerment through storytelling. Fatema Mernessi in *Scheherazade Goes West* examines her own personal experiences, of being read and translated by Western men and how they are intricately interwoven with fantasy, fetish, and Orientalist representations of the harem. However, no work has gone so far as to explore what happens to Sheherazade's narrative or her orality, when she lives in the West. This is why the aim of this study is to explore how and why Sheherazade tells her story from the diaspora, choosing the Arab-American diaspora in particular as a contested home in current global, political, and power dynamics as a result of the "war on terror" and the American occupation of Iraq. The resurgence of *One Thousand and One Nights*, in the literary imaginations of Arab-American women writers, becomes a mode of writing back at the American empire from within: an attempt at translating Arabic culture to an American public enveloped by limited raced representations of Arabs.

With Antoine Galland's 1704 French translation of *One Thousand and One Nights*, the Western imagination became engrossed with these tales of fantastic feats, opulence, and romance.[10] However, this self-conjured seduction has been more a creation shaped by the West's own desires and aspirations than by anything that actually existed in the so-called "Orient." This is probably why *The Nights* has played and still plays an integral role in the construction of Middle-Eastern and Eastern cultures in the Western

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[10] I choose to use the title *One Thousand and One Nights* not *Arabian Nights*, to distinguish between the ethnographical interpretation of these tales and the more accurate translation of the title of the tales from Persian and Arabic which is *One Thousand and One Nights*.

imagination.[11] In particular, the frame tale, with its storytelling at the point of the sword situation has served in shaping the representations of Arab women in Western culture and mainstream American culture, as oppressed and constantly living in fear. Amira Sonbol points out that the study of women of the Islamic world has been subsumed by paradigms and hypotheses that were shaped by the experiences of women in the West or "constructed" and "imagined" histories of women in the East or in Africa. *The Nights* is an example of such an "imagined" history since it was framed within the context of an ethnographical account, through which the European could know all Eastern people, not as the fantastic form of entertainment it was in its cultures of origin (xvii). Actual instances of women's oppression in the Arab and Muslim world are rooted in a complex web of social, political, and historical matrices. Representations of Arab women, though intricately woven with these material experiences of oppression, do not necessarily represent them in mirror fashion. Global capitalist politics shaping translation and interpretation play an important role in framing these representations.[12] Translation, as a cultural exchange, is central within this context because the gaze of the translator portrays impressions of women's lives using criteria familiar to women's struggles in Western cultures, whose grids of conceptualization and cultural symbols have been shaped by different historical and social contexts. These differing social and historical contexts configure the exoticism that constructs Arab and Muslim women as standing outside of

[11] The "Orient" is an umbrella term which is used to refer to a wide variety of cultures which often have very little in common except for the exoticism that some scholars and Orientalists appendage to them.

[12] See Lila Abu-Lughod's interview with Nermeen Al Shaikh .

history bound by unchanging social norms. Studies of Orientalism show that such exoticism is problematic because the individuals and cultures under scrutiny are treated as inherently "Other."

Such Orientalist inclinations can even be traced in the arguments of first world feminist scholars. This is why Chandra Talpade Mohanty discusses the need to interpret discourses of third world women's oppression, in first world feminist discourses, within the context of global capitalism. She underlines the importance of an anticapitalist, antiglobalist feminist project, since the phenomenon of globalization represents "an urgent site for the recolonization of peoples [...] Globalization colonizes women's as well as men's lives around the world, and we need an anti-imperialist, anticapitalist, and contextualized feminist project to make visible the various, overlapping forms of subjugation of women's lives" (*Feminism Without Borders* 236). It is the purpose of this study to explore the various material means through which Arab-American women writers and performers, in the diaspora, resist exoticism and figure their position in relation to constantly shifting collective identities. Moreover, a question which will govern my argument, throughout this study, is how such a resistance can be possible through a collection of tales such as *The Nights*, with all the exoticized interpretations affiliated to it. How can Arab-American women writers and performers resist exoticism and race-thinking through their own exoticized representations?

What is notable in general about the role of women in *The Nights* itself is that they were not helpless victims of their circumstances, but were rather active participants in the unfolding of events around them. The ultimate example of such active participation culminates in Sheherazade, who seeks to marry Shahriyar against the advice of her father,

implementing a plan which involves storytelling to save the young women of her city.[13] However, Sheherazade's empowered intellectual abilities, in Arabic culture, were gradually diminishedl through extensive footnotes in the translations of Edward Lane (1839-1840) and Richard Burton (1885-1888). These footnotes disempowered Sheherazade into the exotic/oppressed stereotype and medieval Arab societies into unchanging historically decontextualized "Arablands." Jack Shaheen describes "Arabland" as a space isolated temporally from Western progressive thought. It is the fictional setting portrayed in so many Hollywood films, which consistently include the desert, oasis, and the palace with a torture chamber. Shaheen states that "when we visit Arabland we must be aware of the instant Ali Baba Kit" of belly-dancers, magic carpets, snake charmers and sword-fighting villains. Interestingly, as Shaheen points out, the "Arabland" of the past is the "Arabland" of the present. Disney's 1992 production of Aladdin is proof of this: "Arabland" is described in the opening lines of the theme song for the Disney movie as a faraway place "where they cut off your ear if they don't like your face. It's barbaric, but hey it's home" (*Reel Bad*).

These Orientalist discourses are revived in Hollywood and television's American versions of *The Nights*. Two examples are Walter Wanger's 1942 *Arabian Nights,* where Maria Montez seduces viewers as the dancing girl Sheherazade, and the 1999 production of *Arabian Nights* directed by Steve Barrons, which reintroduces Sheherazade as the intellectual seductress of oral narrative. In the 1945 film, Sheherazade is no longer the Vizier's daughter, who risks her life to save the women of her city, but rather a power-

[13] It is to be noted that Sheherazade is a Persian name which can either mean of noble race or born in the city.

hungry dancing girl. The plot of the frame narrative is changed so that the two brothers fight over the throne and Sheherazade. Moreover, the empowering role of storytelling is removed from Sheherazade and the other women in the film. This is particularly evident in the first scene of the Wanger film where the harem girls sit around the guardian of the harem, who teaches them stories to "improve their minds. What there is of them" (*Arabian Nights*). Instead of controlling and weaving narrative, these girls sit and parrot the patriarchal guardian. As for Steve Barrons's ABC series which aired April through May in the year 2000, it keeps very much to the original frame tale of Sheherazade, with the exception of some changes that are worthy of analysis. Sheherazade, played by Mili Avital, reassumes the role of expert storyteller; however, complete narrative power is not afforded to Sheherazade since an additional older storyteller is added played by Alan Bates, whom Sheherazade consults with on narrative strategy every night. It is these silencing Orientalist representations that contemporary Arab-American women writers challenge in their writing and performances.

Diasporic Sheherazadian Narrative

With the contemporary revival of Sheherazade, her storytelling techniques and orality, Arab-American women writers and performers weave the "Sheherazadian narrative" with the multi-textured threads of diaspora. In the Arab-American diaspora, this narrative takes on new forms and purposes. First and foremost, it becomes a narrative of resistance to persistent Orientalist representations of these women which portray them as silent, oppressed, or exotic sexual objects of desire. Their resistance is also cultural, since they question representations of their culture as temporally static. Though resistance

was also a key factor in re-appropriations of Sheherazade's narrative in Arab women's writing from the Middle East, it takes prominence in diasporic writing as a result of these writers' and performers' awareness of their American audiences and how mainstream American media and culture races Arab women and men in representation. Moreover, their art represents a negation of the interpretation of *The Nights* as an ethnographical document through which representations of the East and Eastern women can be drawn out unquestioningly. Food becomes a site of cultural negotiations, through which these women explore the mixtures of identity mediations. Muslim women writers wearing the veil/hijab/scarf resist becoming the epitome of their cultures' backwardness through Sheherazadian narrative. Performers on the stage enact the many borders that intersect in their lives. To resist the stereotyping which deprives a people of their humanity, contemporary Arab-American women writers and performers revive and re-sound the voice of Sheherazade in a myriad of tones. They assume the role of cultural translators and place upon themselves the responsibility of telling their own tale. Shahriyar in their tales is a shifting entity, a plethora of Orientalist processes and institutionalized racism which shapes and races representations of Arabs within mainstream American culture. They dance on the hyphen of their identities, as they negotiate their affiliations, performing the nation as they perform the "Sheherazadian narrative" in writing or orally. The empowering role which the "Sheherazadian narrative" assumes in the diaspora is best explained within the context of how counter-narratives contest dominant representational realities helping to construct new realities.[14]

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[14] Henry Louis Gates in *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Man* argues "People arrive at an understanding of themselves and the world through narratives - narratives purveyed by

To create those new realities, we must constantly question and analyze the circumstances under which translation of cultures occurs, to understand how the politics shaping representations of "Oriental" women were and remain to be shaped in the context of neo-imperialistic political agendas, seeking to justify occupation by assuming the ruse of liberating the oppressed "Oriental" woman.[15] The sources of this ongoing fixation upon the "Oriental" woman go back to nineteenth-century colonialism and its polarized conceptions of East and West.[16] Orientalism as a systemized knowledge and discourse on the East, as argued by Said, shaped such representations. In the past, European imperialistic agendas in both Egypt and Algeria claimed that they sought the liberation of the native women. However, after colonization these promises vanished as imperialism subjugated both men and women.

Orientalism and Shifts in Perspective

For the West, the Orient has often been the dwelling place of the "other" and the strange. However, with the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) a significant

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schoolteachers, newscasters, 'authorities,' and all the other authors of our common sense" (106).

[15] I am using the term "Oriental" woman here not as a justification for the existence of such a general term, but to draw attention to the need to open up this term to a positioned analysis which highlights how and why such a construction comes into being.

[16] Interestingly enough, these same empty claims were revived by contemporary American right-wing women's groups like the (IWF) the *Independent Women's Fund*, founded by Lynn Cheney, which launched a ten million dollar program to give the Iraqi women the tools they need to run for office (See Haifa Zangana).

reformulation of the constructedness of exoticised and binary conceptions such as the "East" and "West" took place within cultural thought. Said revealed that Western perceptions of the "other" were more indicative of Western fascinations and fears than the existence of actual Orients. On one level, Western representations of the Orient simply expressed the typical dilemma of representation itself as an attempt to describe a reality painted in the hues of the historical and political perspectives of the representer, in this case the West. One of the main aspects shaping Western representations of the Orient is gender, since constituting otherness discursively is established through gendered as well as cultural modes of differentiation. Meyda Yegenoglu argues, "A more sexualized reading of Orientalism reveals that representations of sexual difference cannot be treated as its sub-domain [...] In addressing the question of sexual difference, it needs to be recognized that fantasy and desire, as unconscious processes, play a fundamental role in the colonial relation that is established with the colonized [...] by colonial or Oriental fantasy I refer not to biologically or psychologically innate individual characteristics, but to a set of discursive effects that constitute the subject" (2). The "Oriental" woman's body becomes, in this context, the stage upon which colonial desires and fantasies are played out.

After Said's exploration of the Orient, a multitude of studies followed which engaged with Said's thought, through an application of his analysis of Western discursive practices. Other studies experimented with the boundaries of his analysis, in deconstructive fashion, by accenting productive venues in his theory and further developing them. For the purposes of this study, which seeks to explore the intersections of discourses of Orientalism and race in diasporic women's reformulations of the

"Sheherazadian narrative," I will attempt to trace some of the major arguments surrounding Said's study of Orientalism extricating gender as a prominent component of Orientalism, as feminist critics like Rana Kabbani, Reina Lewis, Mohja Kahf, Meyda Yegenoglu, and Lisa Lowe have argued. In addition, I will explore how gender is translated in Orientalist discourse and how diasporic Arab-American women writers and performers resist such translations of their culture and lives through recasting key cultural figures like Sheherazade. In this sense, Sheherazade becomes a translational figure whose storytelling opens a window upon another culture. What one needs to always keep in mind is the discrepancy between how she was translated in Early Orientalist and mainstream American discourses and how she is currently translated by Arab-American women writers and peformers. In context of Wolfgang Iser's understanding of the cultural implications of translation, Sheherazadian narrative can be perceived as a practice in cultural mediation.

Iser points to the inevitability of cultures translating one another: "many different cultures have come into close contact with one another, calling for a mutual understanding in terms not only of one's own culture but also of those encountered. The more alien the latter, the more inevitable is some form of translation" (5). Accordingly, it becomes important to explore exactly what the Sheherazadian narrative, as a seemingly "alien" narrative, translates in the diaspora. Tracing the extent to which diasporic counter-discursive translations by Arab-American women challenge hegemonic translations is one of the aims of this study. Moreover, I ask how can translation play a role in sketching out the multiplicity of positions represented by Arab-American women writers and performers in the diaspora? Before this, however, it is important to point out the basic

arguments of Said's *Orientalism*, as they relate to cultural translations and what those translations entail.

Said's Orientalisms

Said states, "neither the term Orient nor the concept of the West has any ontological stability; each is made up of human effort, partly affirmation, partly identification of the Other" (*Orientalism* xvii). Accordingly, it seems then that at the very heart of the Orientalist project is an attempt at translation as defined by Iser through "affirmation" and "identification." However, it is the methods and aims of this Western translational project that deserve analysis. Said, contrary to some of the claims of his critics, was aware that Orientalism was not a monolithic imperialistic structure, but stressed that it functioned in formulating perceptions of Oriental cultures in many nuanced ways. He states that "[t]he Orient that appears in Orientalism [...] is a system of representations framed by a whole set of forces that brought the Orient into Western learning, Western consciousness, and later, Western empire" (*Orientalism* 202-203).

In this, we can glean Said's interpretation of the complicated modes through which Orientalism functions so that it is not merely a tool of imperialism as the latest critique of Said's theory by Ibn Warraq (2007) suggests. Moreover, Said's designation of latent and manifest forms of Orientalism further strengthens this argument.[17] He critiques

[17] See discussion of latent and manifest Orientalism in Said's *Orientalism*. By distinguishing between a latent almost unconscious Orientalism and manifest stated views about Oriental society, Said draws attention to a complexity within Orientalism as it functions upon various conceptual levels, discrediting claims that he saw it as a unified monolith (206).

the binary logic through which the so-called West is set in contrast to the Orient in Western cultural representations and canonical texts so that the Orient represents the inferior, the feminine, and illogical.[18] In this, he highlights how Western knowledge of the "other" tends to be pre-shaped by relations of power. By stressing these pre-shaped relations of power, Said argues that Orientalism is neither objective scholarly research, nor is it a Western conspiracy plot, but rather a discourse which "is produced and exists in an uneven exchange with various kinds of power, shaped to a degree by the exchange with power political [...] power cultural [...] power moral" (*Orientalism* 12). He constantly stresses the mutually dependent relationship between the Orientalist and the Orient, foregrounding in the process how the Orient plays a role in the West's psychological validation of itself by pointing out that "the Orientalist's presence is enabled by the Orient's effective absence" (208). Feminists analyze the ramifications of such a statement when they study how such an "Orientalist presence" was and continues to be mapped out upon "Oriental" women and their bodies.

Feminist Engagements with *Orientalism*: Resisting the "Oriental" Woman

Many critics have engaged with Said taking him to task for what they deem a limiting and limited monolithic portrayal of hegemonic power, which does not allow enough space for resistance. Arguably, however, Said's conception of hegemonic power is developed in productive directions, suggested by him, when discussing how hegemony

[18] Meyda Yegenoglu extends this and suggests that Orientalism is both a mode of " the production of a systematic knowledge and [...] the site of the unconscious – desires and fantasies [this] signifies how the 'Orient' is at once an object of *knowledge* and an object of *desire*" (23).

is enclosed by resistance in a malleable relationship. For him, resistance is not a mere reciprocal reaction to imperialism but "an alternative way of conceiving human history [...] based on breaking down the barriers between cultures" (*Culture and Imperialism* 216). Since it should not be reactionary, it should not follow the same paradigms as imperialism. Accordingly, such resistance needs to be characterized as "gradual" and "sporadic" (*Culture and Imperialism* 219). Considering such an understanding of hegemonic discourse in relation to Mouffe and Laclau's radical understanding of hegemony as a contingent openness provides the possibility of further figuring the contours of resistance. Mouffe and Laclau stress that hegemony is only a political type of relation resulting from certain configurations of power (139). They argue that it has radical political and theoretical potential because when its openness and "sporadic" nature is stressed, a form of politics can be founded which depends on contingency, ambiguity, social division, and antagonism. Within such an understanding of hegemony, it is not a symbolic unity but rather a site of contestation where different subject positions compete.

As far as this applies to negotiations of Arab-American identities, it is important to underscore the fact that both the terms Arab and American carry within them a heterogeneity that defies reductive, unitary conceptions of identity. In making this argument, I am not advocating a chaotic relativity but rather stressing that the complexity of totality be constantly taken into consideration and not be reductively considered as unified. This complexity can be traced in Arab-American women's writing and performances in this study, through their recastings of Sheherazadian narrative and orality. Accordingly, it is the aim of this study to consider how, within such a fluid understanding of hegemony, Sheherazade functions as a figure of resistance. Moreover, I

ask how does she, as a translational figure, evoke and at the same time undermine the hegemonic Orientalist discursive practices about Arab-American women?

One of the main critiques of Said's *Orientalism* is that it constructs Orientalism as an all-pervasive field of knowledge within which attempts at resistance are near impossible. However, with an understanding of hegemony which stresses openness, such arguments become irrelevent. In response to such critiques, feminists have sought to highlight the heterogeneity of "other" women's subject positions. An understanding of hegemony as all-pervasive is particularly troubling for feminists because such an understanding of Orientalism as a single determining tradition leaves no room for the exploration of women's possible subject positions. For this reason, Lowe designates attempts at exploring the heterogeneity of objects of the Orient, with the aim of uncovering their instability, to be a worthy task of feminist critics and a necessary development of Said's analysis of Orientalism. A feminist engagement with Orientalism should show an awareness of "an uneven matrix of orientalist situations across different cultural and historical sites" with awareness "that each of these orientalisms is internally complex and unstable" (Lowe 5).

For Said, hegemony is a multilayered grid of multiple institutions that is always governed by a dynamic process. In its drive to incorporate more elements of resistance in society, hegemony continually makes "slippages" which lead to compromise and change. Accordingly, we can designate the "slippages" of Orientalism as the central zones for resisting its hegemonic tendencies (5). Such an approach entails the possible productivity of Foucault's conception of the function of discourses of power as articulating prohibitions that are themselves enunciations of the categories being policed. This

foregrounds the possibility for cultural resistance through a re-articulation of these enunciations and categories embodied in existing cultural objects or practices because "these objects and practices signify differently depending on social context and on whether they are articulated by dominant or emergent relations of representations" (Lowe 191). Within such a context, Sheherazadian narrative in Arab-American women's writing and performance becomes a site for tracing shifting possibilities of resistance.

Lowe also calls attention to the power of "cultural quotation" and how the repetition of certain cultural signs serves to fix "Oriental" women's representations within a limiting "nexus of various modes of representation" (2-3). It is this "nexus of modes" related to Sheherazade and *The Nights* which Arab-American women writers and performers seek to unsettle. They attempt to explore through"Sheherazadian narratives" and "Sheherazadian orality" how Arab-American women continue to be predetermined by representations of "Oriental" women in past discourses of Romantic poetry, Orientalist literature, Orientalist paintings, and other representations of the Orient. Moreover, this predetermination is not only a characteristic of oppressive Orientalist discourses, but can also be traced even in emancipatory discourses like some forms of feminism which impose Western historical and cultural paradigms upon third-world women.

Lazreg, in "The Triumphant Discourse of Global Feminism," deals with the ramifications of global feminism upon the reception of third world women's texts. Other third world women critics, like Avtar Brah, concentrate upon analyzing the essentializing tendencies in upholding an unquestioned celebration of "difference." Chandra Mohanty and Sara Suleri disagree regarding the means of dispersing first world feminism and opening it up to Other women's perspectives. Mohanty stresses that the oppression of

women must be understood within the interweaving of the political, economic, and cultural systems. She draws attention to the danger of considering all third world women to be oppressed, because such an approach constructs Western feminism alone as the subject of counter histories and third world women are left passive and lacking agency. Such an analysis of third world women, which takes into consideration their agency, becomes all the more important when taking into consideration Arab-American women writers and performers and their situated positioning in the diaspora. These women's lives represent the intersection of second and third wave feminisms, their diverging interests, and their cultural negotiations. If third-world women are always constructed in relation to first world feminists and not self-referentially, they become objects of consumption through which first world feminists practice their authority.

Suleri (1989) takes Mohanty (1986) to task for this argument by claiming that Mohanty is taking refuge in the political untouchability accorded to third world women. She points out that Mohanty's claims to authenticity are troubled by an essentialization of the authenticity of female racial voices. Recently, however, Mohanty has clarified in "Revisiting 'Under Western Eyes'" that her aim in her earlier essay was mainly to clarify that "cross-cultural feminist work must be attentive to the micropolitics of context, subjectivity, and struggle, as well as to the macropolitics of global economic and political systems" (*Decolonizing Theory* 223). In her recent studies (2003), Mohanty acknowledges the multifarious ways through which borders come to be and must remain in feminist discourse arguing that a feminism without borders is not "border-less feminism" because "[i]t acknowledges the fault lines, conflicts, differences, fears, and containment that borders represent [...] that there is no one sense of a border [...] and that

a feminism without borders must envision change and social justice work across these lines of demarcation and division" (*Decolonizing Theory* 2).

Sheherazade's "borderly" Feminism

Arab-American women writers and performers in the diaspora represent a particularly productive space for a study of the convergences and divergences of feminisms and racialized and Orientalist representations. Through their resistant writings and performances, they forge a site of cultural translation which seeks to explore the boundaries of an Arab-American women's diasporic identity position that draws on both national and international allegiances. In such a diasporic position, the nation as well as a collective cultural identity is constantly redefined and narrated. As Paul Gilroy argues, "[b]y embracing diaspora, theories of identity turn instead toward contingency, indeterminacy, and conflict [...] [w]ith the idea of valuing diaspora more highly than the coercive unanimity of the nation" (128). An engagement with the artistic expressions of Arab-American women in the diaspora aids in a better understanding of the complex set of correlatives through which racial difference is constructed within cultural representations and feminisms. This is why diaspora writers and performers inhabit a fertile space for forging intra-cultural understandings through their mediating roles between cultures. Moreover, the performances of Laila Farah, as well as Maysoon Zayid take such cultural reformulations of "Sheherazadian orality" to a new level by introducing an overtly racial correlative, through which these performances undermine racial tensions and prejudices by enacting them and exaggerating them in performance.

Lazreg develops her critique of first world feminism as she analyzes the reception of third world women's narratives and how they are framed through racialized representations. She foregrounds the importance of exploring cultural translation and the problematics inherent in translating ideational histories from one culture to another. It is this interest in exploring the spaces and gaps between ideational histories that this current study seeks to explore through Arab-American women writers's and performers's scrutiny of Sheherazade/sheherazade representations.[19] Lazreg argues that, behind calls for equality and choice, Western feminists are actually promoting individual and institutional choices modelled upon their own societies. When they uphold a relativistic stance by denouncing universalism, they present their constructions of change for Other women in a decontextualized fashion that assumes a universal order of values. A more nuanced historically and politically positioned analysis is needed. This is where the work of Muslim scholar feminists like Margot Badran, Miriam Cooke, Marnia Lazreg, and Mohja Kahf is ground-breaking. Arab-American writers like Diana Abu-Jaber and Mohja Kahf and performers like Laila Farah and Maysoon Zayid challenge such decontextualization by foregrounding Western feminist stereotypes of them as oppressed which do not necessarily need to apply to them. As a third world feminist, Lazreg argues that there are limits to this discourse of liberation designating its limitations within situational, personal and institutional contexts. She explains that within a situational context, empowerment for Western feminists is a condition of the alienation of "Other"

[19] By Sheherazade/sheherazade I am referring to the tension between prevalent cultural representations of these women and how they actually live their lives and negotiate affiliations in the diaspora.

women. Along these lines, when "Other" women rebel they are explained only in terms of dissenting ethnicities, so that all their reactions and interpretations are reduced to a confined and conditioned rhetoric.

Such an approach does not take into consideration some Western feminists's own lack of awareness of their postionality, conditioned and framed within a limited Western perception of freedom. This is due to the fact that underlying these Western feminists' attempts is the assumption that they belong to perfectible societies whereas "Other" women's societies are by definition "traditional."[20] In making this argument, Lazreg is not denying the strong role of tradition and patriarchy in third world women's lives; however, she is drawing attention to how Orientalist conceptions can seep into even the most libratory, equality-seeking discourses. Lazreg points out, "[g]eneralizations and stereotypes still flourish [...] Women's achievements are couched as struggles 'against' not 'for.' What we need is the expression of reality by those who live it on their own terms" (38). In this, she foregrounds the need for Western feminists to critique their own stances, by taking into consideration the role of translation in understanding third world women's lives and deconstructing hierarchical systems framing cross-cultural understanding. In this manner, instead of projecting upon the "Other" woman the weight

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[20] An example of this Western feminist stance is Kay S. Hymowitz's 2003 article in *City Journal* "Why Feminism is AWOL on Islam." In this article, Hymowitz argues that Western feminists have not done enough for their oppressed sisters and must speak up for these women, who cannot speak for themselves. She critiques most of the feminist stances towards "Other" women, arguing for the application of a universal form of feminism. This feminism is no more than the triumphant global discourse that Lazreg critiques.

of oppression in contrast to a first world feminist freedom, first world feminists can better understand their own inherent modes of oppression opening up the barriers to a global feminism. Accordingly, foregrounding the importance of cultural and racial experiences in shaping and negotiating diasporic identities becomes an important goal for the diaspora writers and performers in this study, as they assume the dual tasks of retrieving and recoding what Trinh T. Minh-Ha refers to as the regenerating force of "Grandma's story."[21]

An exploration of Sheherazadian narrative in a diasporic context can open up new spaces for dialogue between feminisms, without framing aspects of third world women's lives within a reductive Orientalist framework governed by notions of superiority. As a cultural narrative, Sheherazadian narrative represents a focal point where disparaging perceptions and representations of Arab-American women's experiences are evoked and challenged in the same instance. Sheherazade in the diaspora becomes an occasion for analyzing "how" images and meanings come in to being; through her, one can map out

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[21] Minh-Ha deconstructs Western culture's attempts at the categorization and hierarchal division of thought which divide orality and writing describing such divisions to be at best forced because "If writing [...] does not express language but encompasses it, then where does the written stop? The line distinguishing societies with writing from those without writing seems most ill-defined and leaves much to be desired [...] Living is neither oral nor written-how can the living and the lived be contained in the merely oral?" (*Woman*, 124). Accordingly, regeneration becomes one of the main purposes of storytelling which for Minha-ha is represented in women's expression through the complex process in which the entire being is involved: "speaking-listening-weaving-procreating" (125).

the intersections of different cultural representations and feminisms. Through textual and oral representations of Sheherazade, the constructed boundaries between forms of expression are questioned. Sheherazade instigates the exploration of multiple affiliations, feminisms, cultural representations and the permeable boundaries between textuality and orality within diasporic women's writings and performances.

In concentrating upon the developments that have shaped Sheherazadian narrative and Sheherazadian orality in Arab-American women's writing, this study introduces an innovative correlative to previous studies concentrating upon the figure of Sheherazade.[22] Although previous studies explore aspects of Sheherazade's translation into different cultures, this study is unique in its concentration upon how Sheherazade's framing tale is reworked to describe the tensions between nation and diaspora, as well as fetishized representations of Arab and Muslim women living in the West. I would like to underline that "living" in the previous sentence is a key term because what this study seeks to explore is not a mere travelling Sheherazade, who "goes" West, but rather; a Sheherazade who "lives" in the West and her position in relation to collective cultural productions and collective identities.

Studying the recasting of Sherazade's frame tale in relation to diasporic women's experiences also allows for an analysis of collective identities while opening them up to difference as determined by Stuart Hall's theorization of diasporic articulation to be, "not by essence [...] but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a

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[22] Some examples are Susan Gauch's study *Liberating Shahrazad: Feminism, Postcolonialism and Islam*, Fatema Mernessi's *Scheherazade Goes West* and Muhsin Jassim Ali's *Scheherazade in England.*

conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference" ("Cultural Identity and Diaspora" 452). Accordingly, an analysis of diasporic women's experiences as functioning "with and through difference" diaspora "implies neither [...] the comfort of abstraction, an easy recourse to origins, nor [...] a foolproof anti-essentialism: instead, it forces us to articulate discourses of cultural and political linkage only through and across difference in full view of the risks of that endeavour" (Edwards 13). Arguably an anlysis of Arab-American women's explorations of their representations in early Orientalist and contemporary mainstream American media takes place through articulations of positioned "cultural and political linkage." Collective identities - whether Arab, American or Arab-American - are conceived as residing in a realization of the acknowledgment that they function through both structure and malleability. Within such a context of fluctuation, multiple affiliations within an understanding of nation become more viable.

Sheherazade and Sites of Translation

Sheherazade, the narrator of *One Thousand and One Nights*, occupies an interesting site of translation in relation to Arab women's writing and performance because of the various versions of her revival in Modern Arabic literature. The significance of the modern revival of interest in *The Nights* is underlined by critics like Muhsin Al-Musawi who traces the growth of modern Arabic postcolonial fiction in relation to increasing interest in this amorphous text. In contrast to Western and European enthusiasm for these tales, *The Nights* struggled to gain recognition in elite Arabic

culture.[23]An important question to consider here is why this text would assume such a central position in formulating Western representations of the Orient, when it occupied such a peripheral position within Arabic literature? What did the tales of *The Nights* provide for nineteenth-century translators like Edward Lane, Thomas Payne, and Richard Burton?

Critics postulate in answer to such questions that "there is no trope that can accommodate the colonial desire better than the enormous taste for *The Thousand and One Nights* as signified in the title given to the tales by the anonymous Grub Street translator, *Arabian Nights' Entertainments*" (Al-Musawi 72). The very change of the title from *The Thousand and One Nights* to *Arabian Nights' Entertainments* signals these imperialistic aspirations, as *The Nights* become a monolithic embodiment of a diverse group of people. Interestingly enough, the origin of the title whether in Persian or Arabic does not contain any reference to its being "Arabian" since the tales are really a composite creation of stories from India, Persia as well as the Arab world. This makes the attempt to pin them down to a particular culture a questionable move tainted by imperialism. This imperialist stance takes its fullest form in the translation of the narrator of *The Nights,* Sheherazade, into Western, European culture. While the narrator of *The Nights* is caught in a web of narrative where narrating stories becomes equivalent to life,

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[23] *The Nights* failed to attract the attention of Arab literary critics due to the questionable role of popular folklore in Arabic literature which saw the vernacular oral tales of *The Nights* to be beneath the standards of prestigious literary creation. It took the pioneering work of the Egyptian scholar Suhayr Qalamawi who wrote her dissertation on *The Nights* in 1939 to begin to undermine this exclusion of *The Nights*.

the nineteenth-century Victorian translators are keen upon portraying Sheherazade as the seductress, blurring in a sense her role with the adulteress queen, Shahriyar's first wife. Recastings of the figure of Sheherazade seek to undermine this. Al-Musawi explains that revisionist readings of the Sheherazade frame tale which increasingly seek to see her as a prototypical feminist are well grounded because of her wit and resourcefulness, as well as the possibility of her interpretation as a female precursor (74-78).

Fedwa Malti-Douglas's contribution to analyses of Sheherazade lies in her designation of the connection of narration, to contexts of desire in Sheherazade's narrative. Malti-Douglas states that one of the most unique characteristics of her narrative is the manner through which she "controls the relation between desire and the text, at least up to a point" (11). Sheherazade uses narrative to refuse completion and constantly leaves her listener in suspense. As Malti-Douglas argues, "This manipulation of narrative desire is far more than merely a means of gaining time [...] It is a key pedagogical tool [...] Shahrazad shifts the problem of desire from the area of sex, the realm of Shahriyar's trauma, to the superficially more distant and more malleable world of the text" (22). By placing the male in the listener's position; Sheherazade places herself in an active authoritative position, while Shahriyar assumes the passive position of listening. Malti-Douglas constantly stresses the importance of woman's body and its relation to woman's word and expression. This is foregrounded in her understanding of the role of desire in shaping the text so that Sheherazade's oral recounting of the tales becomes a direct expression of her body. Such an argument becomes particularly pertinent to Arab-American performances and Sheherazadian orality in my fourth chapter.

Sheherazade between Narrative and Orality

The Sheherazadian narrative in contemporary Arab-American women's writing comprises of many instances of resistance to stereotypical representations of Arab women, particularly in popular American culture. Dispersion becomes a governing goal of these women's writings and performances as identities, affiliations, and collective cultural allegiances are examined and questioned. Sheherazade and her narrative strategies become in this context a collective means for reviving and redefining grandmother figures from the past. Sheherazade's storytelling, as a life saving strategy, becomes a metaphor for the urgency of exploring why and how figures like Sheherazade are translated across cultures and how Orientalism shapes such translations. Moreover, with the increasing forces of globalization, which are persistently overwhelming every aspect of our lives, resistant representational practices are thrust into a field where the politics of neo-imperialism, stereotypes, and collective attempts at self-definition all intersect. Identity categories of the Arab and Muslim woman are opened up and explored as we study how factors of aversion and desire shape representations of Arab and Muslim women in the diaspora especially as critics like Shahnaz Khan argue.[24] The Sheherazadian narrative, as a form of Arab-American women's storytelling, can hence be interpreted as a mode of Third Wave Feminist discourse, which critiques the structures and Western paradigms of Second Wave Feminism, opening venues for interpreting women's experiences through shades of difference. Diasporic "Sheherazadian narrative"

[24] By aversion and desire Khan means the polar tendencies shaping Muslim women's experience of their identities within the context of contradictory tendencies to desire to claim a stable Muslim identity or the aversion to coding themselves as Muslim or allowing others to code them as such.

and its orality is hence a particularly productive space of analysis because of its defiance of pure social formations and totalizing theories of affiliation. This transmutability makes Sheherazadian narrative comparable to the narrative of the Mestiza, "an exemplary figure of a fertile political and cultural discursive territory in which to explore metaphors such as hybridity and difference" (Emberley 158).

In the performances carried out by Arab-American playwrights such as Laila Farah and stand-up comedian Maysoon Zayid, Sheherazade's storytelling further develops as the openness and orality of *The Nights* is revived and recontextualized by these performers. New meaning is given to Bhabha's conception of performing the nation as these women perform the hyphens shaping their affiliations as Arab-American women, against the backdrop of the paranoid nationalism and institutionalized racism of the George W. Bush administration. Through their various performative techniques, these women resist the institutionalization of racism in their society. Accordingly, Sherene Razack's analysis of race thinking paradigms becomes pertinent in relation to these women's performances because of their direct exploration of race issues and their performance of how the terms Arab and Muslim become raced.

Such performative attempts revive the original orality of *The Nights,* which was often told by storytellers as street entertainment. Leila Ahmed in her memoir *Border Passage* discusses the centrality of orality in Islamic culture and its role in shaping recurring themes of peace, arguing that there is fluidity to religious practices of Egyptian women which ensues from the oral/aural rather than textual. She points out, "[a]urally what remains when you listen to the Quran over a lifetime are its most recurring themes [...] mercy, justice, peace, compassion, humanity, fairness, kindness, truthfulness, charity

[...] One could even argue that an emphasis on an oral and aural Islam is intrinsic to Islam and the Quran itself" (*Border Passage* 126-127). Moreover, orality challenges essentialist binarisms which situate the oral at the margins and the textual at the centre, through rupturing this binary and refocusing upon orality. Arab-American women performers bring to the fore the process of racing through which an effacement of their realities takes place by fetishization strategies.

In the following chapters, my intention will be to differentiate how the Sheherazadian narrative and orality endeavour to produce cultural translation in the diasporic context, discerning this narrative's and orality's relation to issues of culture, diasporic identity, race, and gender. In chapter one, I will deal with the histories of Orientalism and racialization shaping representations of Arab and Muslim-American women. In chapter two, I will discuss how Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent* (2003) reformulates *The Nights* as an Arabic collective cultural production, appropriating its episodic storytelling style to resist monolithic understandings of identity and affiliation. It seeks to inscribe an active, performative understanding of nation, opening space for an understanding of citizenship that respects the affiliations of Arab-American citizens, without generally interpellating them as a home-grown threat. Food takes precedence in this chapter as a space for cultural production and negotiation. In chapter three, I will explore how the Sheherazadian narrative in Kahf's collection of poetry, *E-Mails from Scheherazad* (2003), works to reinvent the lived experience of wearing the headscarf in relation to Muslim women's diasporic experiences. This re-narration challenges ethnocentric biases about either strictly Muslim or American identities, dispersing fetishized representations of Sheherazade as the oppressed Muslim woman so popular in

the media. Here the Sheherazadian narrative functions through poetic form, narrating the multi-vocality of Muslim and Arab-American women's experiences in the diaspora. Fashion and clothing take priority as sites for cultural struggle. In chapter four, I examine Sheherazadian orality and the cultural transformations it instigates through performance. Performance becomes a space where Arab-American and Muslim women can gain agency, through re-imagining themselves and their cultures. As a result, stereotypical representations are called into question. The Sheherazadian narrative regains the empowerment of orality as Arab-American women perform the intersections shaping their lives in the diaspora.

Chapter 1

Fixating on Sheherazade: Why Recast Her?

Contemporary Arab-American comedians mark the prevalent fixation upon *The Nights* in American popular culture and subversively use it to challenge pervading race-thinking and Orientalist conceptions. This fixation on *The Nights* is so common that the Arab-American stand-up comedian, Dean Obeidallah, recalls this context in a satirical joke about *The Nights*. *The Nights* becomes the common ground which defines and shapes how he introduces himself to people who have no knowledge of the Middle East. He describes an incident at a checkout, where a cashier, upon reading his name on his credit card, suspiciously questions him about his name and ethnicity. When he buys something and gives the cashier his credit-card the cashier asks, "Hey buddy what kind of name is that?" Dean answers, "It's an Arabic name." This raises the cashier's suspicions and he further questions, "Yeah but what does this mean?" Dean laconically answers, "Well translated into English, it means peaceful friendly Arab?" Apparently this does not satisfy the cashier as he probes further, "Yeah, what Arab country is your family from?" So Dean jokingly introduces his *Nights* punch line, pointing out that he thinks of the most peaceful friendly country he could conceive and answers, "We're from the same Arab country that ... Aladdin is from" (*The Arab-American Comedy*).

Through this humorous recasting of *The Nights* and its characters as the only common cultural ground through which Obeidallah, an Arab-American stand-up comedian, can negotiate a space for himself within American culture, the significance of the recasting of *The Nights* and Sheherazadian narrative as sites of cultural translation becomes evident. Consequently, as a common register for communication, Sheherazadian

narrative - in Arab-American women's writing and performance - represents a common cultural space through which reinterpretation of stereotypes can commence. In the diaspora, such a need for cultural translation becomes all the more important because of Arab-Americans's direct experiences of being raced. However, this does not mean that this common space of translation is unriddled with discrepancies. Obeidallah's appropriation of *The Nights* in the above excerpt from his stand-up routine foregrounds such discrepancies, as he is forced to resort to the stereotypical representations of Disney's *Aladdin* to describe his Arab-American identity position. Paradoxically, then, *The Nights* and Sheherazadian narrative, despite all the Orientalist and stereotypical baggage linked to them, provide a common ground for re-imagining the Arab-American experience of race in a post 9/11 world. Such re-appropriation is constantly troubled by the danger of further re-inscribing the stereotypes, instead of undermining them. Through the power of translation, Sheherazade was denied agency in nineteenth-century translations and through this very same medium, she regains agency in twenty-first century Arab-American women's writings and performance.

The "Orient" and Sheherazade

The history of the reception of Sheherazade and *The Nights* in the West is intricately woven with questions of Arab and Arab women's representations. When I argue that Arab-American women writers and performers are resisting Orientalist representations and the racist proliferations that ensue from them, I am referring to Orientalist discourses that have their roots in the nineteenth century when Orientalism was a credible discipline. Through the repetition of images and metaphors, these Arab

women were reduced to stereotypes of either oppression or beckoning sensuality. In addition to these older forms of Orientalism, these women are primarily responding to constructions of Arab-Americans and Arab-American women in contemporary Orientalist American discourse. This newer Orientalism is mostly propagated through Hollywood movies and popular media forms. These discourses were and remain woven within the political propaganda of colonialism and imperialism. Accordingly, *The Thousand and One Nights* and Sheherazade represent key factors in fetishizing and exoticizing the Middle East and constructing it as the Orient.

Critics have long argued that within the construction of the Orient, a tension between reality and fiction exists. The nineteenth-century translations of *The Nights* in particular, through notes, prefaces, and insertions in the translations blurred the lines between reality and fiction.[25] Richard Burton's translation of *The Nights* (1885), in particular, is characterized by its extensive notes, which were a distinguishing feature of the nineteenth-century craze for anthropology and ethnology, so the tales in addition to the notes make *The Nights* a revelation of "a personal East" not a written account of an actual East (Sironval 240). The travel associated with the colonialist endeavour gave rise to extensive notes on the peoples of the East in these translations. These highly subjective notes often framed the morals, and customs of a medieval society in *The Nights* as a historically pertinent depiction of the middle-east in the nineteenth-century, suggesting the reality of a highly fetishized exoticised East frozen in the past. Though Edward

[25] The three most well-known Victorian translations of *One Thousand and One Nights* were Edward Lane (1838-1840), John Payne (1884), and Richard Burton (1885).

Lane's translation is not as extensive in its notes, he also framed his qualifications for translating *The Nights* in relation to his *Description of Egypt* (1828). This overtly historical account seemed to frame the exotic and "Oriental" descriptions of *The Nights* within a more realistic context, at least to its nineteenth century readers. Edward Said discusses the significance of such framings and their role in constructing the Orient through a process of citation. According to this, each translator translates the East primarily depending upon preceding translations. Consequently, each translator cites his predecessor as an authority on the East, regardless of the realities of the actual Middle East.

This is why French writers like "Nerval and Flaubert preferred Lane's descriptions to what their eyes and minds showed them immediately" (Said, *Orientalism* 177). It is in this sense then that the Orient, for Said and for researchers interested in Orientalism after him, becomes a topos and a group of characteristics the origin of which are quotations and fragmented texts. As far as this applies to representations of Arab women we find that these women become an open ground for mapping out cultural differences. With the gradual Orientalization of the Orient, through the development of a complex body of knowledge about the East, the Arab woman came to represent the negative female ideal that changing European societies could agree to ridicule and fetishize. This simultaneous objectification and fascination with the Orient coloured many of the attempts at constructing the Middle East and its peoples from the nineteenth century onwards.

In fact, the influence of these tales is so pervasive that scholars have pointed out that it would be best to list the eighteenth and nineteenth-century writers who have not

been influenced by *The Nights*, rather than all those who have (Irwin 290). In painting, architecture and early twentieth-century film as well, *The Nights* played a central role in how the world perceived the East and the Middle East in particular. The influence of *The Nights* was so prevalent that in the words of Yamanaka and Nishio "[n]o other single work of Oriental literature (besides the Bible) has had such a long-lasting and deep impact on world culture" (3).

Foregrounding the Background

The Nights as a widely distributed text in Europe, played a central role in the objectification of the East because, as it was read, the objects which represented the background and surrounding environment of these tales like the geniis, magical lamps, carpets, and flying horses became the main subject of interest over the narrative. In a sense, then, the fantastic became a fetish upon which readers fixated. The danger in such fixation is that it lacks an understanding of the role of the fantastic in literature and how it functions as a moment of uncertainty.[26] By denying the fantastic experience of uncertainty and replacing it with certainty, what many artists expected in travelling East was a certain exotic reality, not an uncertain moment of exploring reality which is what the fantastic really encourages. This is why many artists felt that by "reaching the shores of Africa or the Middle East they would be able to fire their imaginations with new

[26] Todorov defines the fantastic as a moment of uncertainty, when there is a possible simple explanation for an apparently supernatural phenomenon, which is at the same time stripped of internal probability (25-26).

experiences and new themes. Orientalism was felt as an irresistible call, though of course, for some, the Orient itself was not always within reach" (Lemaire 220). This is why the Orient to these artists did not necessarily correlate to a specific geographical location and the artist did not necessarily need to visit it.

Accordingly, then, the English nineteenth-century reader of *The Nights* was in a perfect position of non-alignment as far as the translated meaning of *The Nights* is concerned since, in translation terminology, there was no awareness of the register or context of the translated text. This paved the way for the central role *The Nights* played in orientalizing the East. Moreover, because there was a dislocation between the cultural assumptions of the two languages of translation, Arabic and English, this non-alignment was further aggravated. While in the Arabic language, *The Nights* was primarily an oral form of entertainment, in the nineteenth-century English translations, it became primarily an anthropological text; this is clear in Richard Burton's approach. The cultural presumptions regarding its role in Arabic societies as entertainment became no longer applicable, and the cultural presumptions held by its nineteenth-century English readers were consequently inadequate. This is why "[i]f the reader is essentially ignorant of life in an Islamic society, he or she tends to read for the exotic: to make a foreground, or highlight, that which, for the text, is background" (Sallis 10). As a result of this misplaced foregrounding, nineteenth-century writers constructed the exotic "other" through an insufficient understanding of *The Nights* and the role of the fantastic in it. In Arabic societies, *The Nights'* tales were told by storytellers with the main aim of instigating the imaginative fancies of their listeners. Through prolific marvellous descriptions of materials and objects, the nineteenth-century writers influenced by *The Nights*

foregrounded the background, which was mainly an accessory to the various meanings of the narrative.[27]

Just as the world and background of *The Nights* was exoticized, so was Sheherazade, the main narrator. In the original Arabic printed editions Bulaq I, Breslau, Macnaghten and Leiden, Sheherazade's physical beauty is never mentioned. Sallis points out, "that Sheherazade is a 'matchless beauty' is a European interpolation which suggests a much narrower appreciation of heroines and their attributes" (102). Despite the fact that Richard Burton and Edward Lane do not mention Sheherazade's physical beauty, due to the fact that Galland added it before them the European readers read it into the text because these readers interacted with earlier translations as well as with contemporary translations. The problematic behind Sheherazade being a "matchless beauty" is that it decreases her narrative power by suggesting that she was able to manipulate the king primarily through sexual desire. In this attempt to reduce Sheherazade's intellectual and narrative abilities to sexual prowess, we can trace the origins of the "seductive bellydancer" stereotype that represents the eroticised "Oriental" woman as all body with no intellect. Another misreading, repeated throughout these translations, is that Sheherazade is a victim who told the tales only to save her life. This interpretation of Sheherazade's motives for storytelling reduces Sheherazade to a reactive, willing victim. She is denied the agency and intellect to plan a much wider reformational agenda. These

[27] Most of the discussion of how translation has shaped *the Nights* is from Eva Sallis's introduction to *Sheherazade through the Looking Glass.*

interpretations override the fact that it is Sheherazade who insists on being married to the King despite her father's attempts to dissuade her.

Edward Lane in his translation chooses to disempower Sheherazade intentionally to fit Sheherazade into a "Victorian Miss yearning" paradigm, "changing the text to read that either she will die, saving only the girl she replaces, or the women will be saved with her [...] either noble or a martyr, whereas the real Sheherazade is a woman determined to end an intolerable situation by persuasion, cunning or force" (Sallis 104-105). In this diminishment of Sheherazade's subjectivity and agency, early traces of the stereotype of the Arab woman as the "silent willing victim" can also be discerned. In view of that, we can trace within Sheherazade's translation into European and Western culture the roots of prevalent stereotypes which plague representations of Arab and Muslim women, and by extension Arab-American women, to this day. These representations confine these women and their affiliations within fixed, set, and limited paradigms of interpretation. They recycle overdetermined images of exoticism and victimization, derived from an interpretation of *The Nights* as an anthropological source.

Arguably, then, the history of Sheherazade's representation is interwoven with Orientalist conventions of projection and investment which envision "Orientals" "as something one judges (as in a court of law), something one studies and depicts (as in a curriculum), something one disciplines (as in a school or prison) [so that] the Oriental is *contained* and *represented* by dominating frameworks" (Said, *Orientalism* 40). However, what the Arab-American women writers and performers in this study do is challenge the representations of Sheherazade as the monolithic Arab or Muslim woman foregrounding her voice, agency, and the power to represent themselves. The exoticism and

victimization that Sheherazade has come to embody in the West, are obstacles in the paths of women writers and performers of Arab backgrounds "[b]ecause their images have been so overdetermined, any Arab or Muslim woman writer's traversal of the imaginary frontier between Orient and Occident always reverberates bidirectionally" so that "unequal distributions of wealth and power [...] create seemingly insurmountable divisions out of religious, cultural, and social differences" (Gauch xii). In their attempts to reintroduce Sheherazade and her orality in their writings and performances, these artists seek to halt the co-optation of their representations in the service of reductionist thought and neo-imperialism. As Suzanne Gauch argues concerning Maghrebian writers who reintroduce Sheherazade in their writing, these Arab-American women writers and performers "elaborate complex relations to those they represent as well as to their audience, their stories, like Shahrazad's, call for boundary-crossing, multidirectional, ever-evolving analysis" (Gauch xiii).

Open-ness and the Evolutionary Nature of Sheherazadian Narrative

The resistance to narrative closure through foregrounding the need for "ever-evolving analysis" is probably the most distinguishing characteristic of these Arab-American artists's re-manipulation of Sheherazadian narrative. As it was an oral form of storytelling told in several sessions in a serial manner, *The Nights* never conveyed an idea of closure. In fact, Sheherazade's own nightly storytelling process also encouraged an idea of infinity and the narrative openness. Consequently, Sheherazade lives in what Ferial Ghazoul refers to as the "perpetual present" (Ghazoul 96). Sheherazade's dwelling in the "perpetual present" is what opens a space for the reincarnations of Sheherazade's

tales in different contexts since the storytelling process encourages a continuous being. This tendency towards infinite storytelling and a continuous manipulation of time is how the Sheherazadian narrative functions, "Thus in its perpetual drive, *The Arabian Nights* conquers time" (Ghazoul 98). Since Sheherazadian narrative, in the original frame tale, functions through a continuous effort to possess and heal Shahriyar, "[t]he reader or listener invests energy into the narrative, just as Shahriyar did. There is, in a sense, occupation: control without incorporation" (Ghazoul 96). This is what makes the sexual power politics of Sheherazade's frame tale applicable to this day in Arab-American women writers's and performers's works. In fact, if scholars who study *The Nights* and Sheherazade are to learn anything about this amorphous text and storyteller, it is this experience of living in the "perpetual present" which resists fixation.

Sheherazade, through her continuous improvisational storytelling, invites us into the time zone of the perpetual where a resolution is not the goal, but rather continuous deferral. This continuous deferral becomes a productive *dihlizian* environment, where reinterpretation thrives because of the openness and malleability of this space. Suzanne Gauch argues,

> [t]he very attempts by translators and adaptors to usurp Shahrazad's voice by carefully delimiting her role in the *Nights* have thus only succeeded in endowing her character with an eternal quality that makes of her a powerful literary ancestor for those who call for a new status for Arab and Muslim women within and beyond the Arab world. (5)

However, despite the argument that Sheherazade's reductive translations only fuelled her inauguration as a literary storytelling figure that fosters openness and malleability. Such a

statement must be taken carefully because within it is an inherent acceptance of the objectification that shaped Sheherazade's representations in nineteenth century translations. This is why the Orientalist implications underlying Sheherazade's translations must always be foregrounded. If all that Sheherazade has been in nineteenth century translations is a projection of desires, fears, and fetishes, Arab-American women writers and performers take upon themselves the responsibility of undermining these monolithic images. They bring them down to the ground of the present, social, and political realities that shape the lives of actual Arab and Muslim women in the Arab-American diaspora.

Objectifying Sheherazade Pictorially: The Political Implications of Images of Sheherazade in Early European Translations

Margaret Sironval's study of the images of Sheherazade in early English and French translations traces the roots of the fascination with Sheherazade and her divided position between subjectivity and objectivity. I trace how the frame tale and Sheherazade's imagery was foregrounded and diminished throughout the prominent translations of the eighteenth and nineteenth-centuries to reveal shifting social and political attitudes towards the East. In Galland's translation, Sheherazade is hardly mentioned in the text or imagery. This is due to two main illustrative and textual decisions made by Galland and his translators into English.[28] Textually, the first English

[28] It is important to point out here that *The Nights* was circulating in England before the well-known nineteenth-century translations by Edward Lane, John Payne, and Richard Burton in the

edition translation of Galland's *One Thousand and One Nights, Arabian Tales* (1704) was *Arabian Nights' Entertainments: Consisting of the Thousand and One Stories.* This translation diminished Sheherazade's agency because it foregrounded the number of stories rather than the number of nights, so that readers no longer perceived the perpetual narrative suspense linked to Sheherazade's storytelling. Pictorially, this first illustrated edition of the frame story which appeared in France opened with an illustration of "the Lady Shut Up in the Glass Case." This full-page engraving blurs the lines between Sheherazade the storytelling subject and "the Lady," who uses her bodily charms to avenge the imprisonment imposed upon her, by her husband the genie. Hence, the image of the "Lady Episode" shaped the reading of Sheherazade's story, hiding Sheherazade's verbal and intellectual abilities.

The most significant visual appearance of Sheherazade after this is in the mid-nineteenth century in both France and England. The French 1840 Bourdin edition displays Sheherazade, Shahriyar, and her sister Dinarzade. Above them is a medallion of the translator Galland and surrounding them are a number of motifs which represent the various themes of *The Nights*. Through a mixture of Arabian horses, Chinese dragons, and Indian elephants a rather fragmented and vague visual depiction of the East ensues. This is considered the first pictorial rendition of the frame tale to encapsulate the temporal and narrative structures of these tales and Sheherazade's role in relation to those structures. Edward Lane's translation (1839-1840) illustrated by W. Harvey depicted the costumes and architecture of the Middle East with great detail so that this edition

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form of what is known as the "Grub Street" edition (1706), whose title was translated into English as *Arabian Nights' Entertainments: consisting of the Thousand and One Stories.*

appeared like "A pictorial Journal of Lane's travels in the East" (Sironval 234). In Lane's translation, Sheherazade and Dinarzade appear in "an Islamic architectural scene of a dome in which Sheherazade occupies the centre with her sister Dinarzade, while Sultan Shahriyar is almost occulted" (Sironval 234).

The English title of the tales becomes *Thousand and One Nights.* In portraying Sheherazade, Lane prefers to convey her as a willing victim presenting her as "a Victorian lady strongly desiring to be a noble martyr" (Sironval 235). In the opening of Richard Burton's translation (1885-1888), Sheherazade disappears and is replaced by a full length photo of Burton. Burton describes her initiative to marry Shahriyar in one of his copious notes as the act of a vengeful maid who has the sole intention of killing the king.[29] In all of these depictions of Sheherazade and the East, we can trace the Orientalist outlines, through which the translator and the reader conceive the East as a blank sheet upon which one's own imaginative excursions can be delineated, irrespective of actual life in the East. Arguably, then, these translators, through their textual and pictorial renditions of the Sheherazade figure, deny Sheherazade a control over text, depriving her space for subjectivity.

Contexts and Registers of Translation

In shaping our understanding of the cultural significance of *The Nights*, we should keep in mind that *The Nights* was not created by its many storytellers and compilers as a

[29] The past discussion of the portrayal of Sheherazade in early editions and translations of *The Nights* depends mainly on Margaret Sironval's paper "The Image of Sheherazade in French and English Editions" in Yamanaka and Nishio's study *The Arabian Nights and Orientalism.*

historical account, but was primarily a form of popular entertainment. With its first translation into a European language in 1704 by Antoine Galland, *The Nights* remained initially in the eighteenth-century a spaceto indulge the imagination, and to revel in the fantastic and unreal. By the nineteenth century, as colonialism in its modern form began to spread, *The Nights* was increasingly constructed as a realistic and accurate portrayal of people living in the East as a whole. In this lies the inequivalence in registers of translation; the manipulation of *The Nights*, for purposes beyond its role of entertainment in its original culture, creates a disjunction between its function in Arabic culture and its function as designated through nineteenth century English translations. As far as *The Nights* was concerned, there was no agreement established regarding the purpose of translation. In fact "[t]he *Nights* was received in the absence of any such understanding, and the culture of its origin was subjected to extremes of prejudice and ignorance [...] encourag[ing] many to believe that Galland had invented the tales" (Sallis 6). Translation should provide the venue for looking upon another culture since Sallis points out, "A translation can be described as a window on another literature and, at times, another culture; a window, not a door – we look, but do not pass to the other side" (Sallis 7). The problem with most of the nineteenth-century translations of *The Nights* is that these tales were introduced as the "door" to the understanding of a people as a whole, so that the approach to reading this textual world became primarily anthropological, rather than a literary experience that provides a perspective, a window.

Such an approach is coloured by the understanding that "[a]n influential translation between substantially polarised cultures is a political act, sometimes even an act of sabotage or cold war" (Sallis 9). The nineteenth century English translations of *The*

Nights were hence shaped by England's colonialist interests in the Middle East. The politically-driven reception of *The Nights* in England had a strong effect upon its reception in the United States. Moreover, as these tales crossed the Atlantic to the U.S. it became more evident that malleability was the governing characteristic which should shape interpretation. *The Nights'* compilation history covers many centuries of translations and editions making it a very composite text, resulting from much recombining. In fact, the tales were transformed several times first orally, then in writing, then later recombined and collected for the first time in Iraq around the tenth century. Then they were repeated and enlarged with other tales in Egypt in the fourteenth century. By the end of the eighteenth century new manuscripts were drawn up of the tales so that they took the form we are more familiar with now (Sironval 219-220). Moreover, "Manuscripts, translations, editions of the *Nights* bring new variants as the story passes on from one translator to another, from one edition to another, and from one illustrator to another. This transmission is linked to historical, cultural and social developments" (Sironval 219). The translation of *The Nights* into mainstream American popular culture represents one further stage in the transmutation of these tales.

American Orientalism

It is this American variety of Orientalism, which mostly takes its form in twentieth-century popular media forms, to which Arab-American women writers and performers are directly responding. This Orientalism had its roots in eighteenth-century discourses. In 1776, the average knowledge any American had of the Middle East would have probably come from *The King James Bible* or *One Thousand and One Nights* (Little

11). In the early nineteenth century, McGuffey reader books, which were the most popular and widely circulated school books at the time, presented an exotic and evil Middle East to school children (Little 13). In the early decades of the nineteenth century, the image of the Orient/Middle East was shaped by representations of the Holy Land. The Orient for many Protestant Americans was linked to a spiritual heritage, which was mixed with Orientalist elements of exoticism, adoration, and appropriation extrapolated from England. As a land frozen in time, the Orient was constructed as a place ruled by despots, full of cruelty, barbarism, and associated with tyranny and slavery; it was portrayed as a space of decadence and decay.

In the early decades of the nineteenth century, Orientalist imagery began to be introduced in the United States in the form of paintings, photographs, decorative arts, and fashion (Edwards 16-17). From this, missionaries, merchants, and travellers represented the Middle East, forging through cultural assumptions and racial stereotypes a form of "intellectual shorthand" for referring to the Middle East in films, cartoons, and popular magazines later on. An 1847 advertisement for a show entitled "Bedouin Arabs" presented by the Ravel family presents the Arab as an object of fetishization, a spectacle. In this "celebrated performance," the Ravel family delights through "appear[ing] correctly attired, and offer[ing] a personation of the REAL BEDOUIN." Moreover, they perform "wonderful feats of force and dexterity displayed by the BEDOINS [sic]" (Howard Athenaeum playbill).

Mark Twain's satirically humorous tour in the Holy Land entitled *Innocents Abroad* (1869) represented the Arabs as a homogeneous group that was "by nature and training filthy, brutish, ignorant, unprogressive and superstitious" (qtd. in Naber, *Intro.*

24). Gradually towards the end of the nineteenth century and with the coming of the twentieth century, through representations of the Orient at the Chicago World's Fair of 1893, elements of exoticism and the sexualization of the East began to introduce themselves so that the Orient becomes "different and exotic, complete with mosque, bazaar, harem, and belly dancers to titillate Victorian Americans" (Little 13). This sexualization found its full actualization in U.S. popular culture in the entertainment industry generally and in Hollywood films in particular.

With the early twentieth century, the Orient in popular U.S. culture and Hollywood films became an exotic space where American desires could be fulfilled, despite the Production Codes which forbade the portrayal of passionate scenes. Shohat and Stam point out thatthe inaccessible, "Oriental" veiled woman emerged as a symbol that represents "the availability of Eastern Land for Western penetrating knowledge and possession" (148-149). From the early days of Hollywood silent cinema, to the latest blockbuster movies there is a consistent dehumanizing, vilifying representation of Arab men and Arab women. In his documentary, *Reel Bad Arabs*, Jack Shaheen discusses how Hollywood has through a few structured and repeated images projected the Arab man mostly as a villain and the Arab woman as mainly a sexual object. In *Samson Against the Sheik* (1962), the sexually over charged Arab sheikh is displeased by all his harem inhabitants and lusts after the white blond from the West, who does not want to be seduced. In *Cannonball Run 2* (1981) Jamie Farr plays the rich and stupid sheikh who lacks the intelligence to know the value of money. Moreover, he is uncontrollably obsessed with American women. The whole plot of *Protocol* (1984) revolves around an Arab Emir's ominous seduction of the blond Goldie Hahn. In *Never Say Never* (1983)

Kim Basinger is tied to a pole and auctioned off to primitive looking Arab Bedouins. As for the representations of Arab women, we find that they fall under three main categories: the exotic belly dancer, the terrorist, and the bundle in black. It seems that as Arab women gain more freedom, they are consistently denied this reality in Hollywood films. The highly sexualized belly dancer appears in films like *Young Sherlock Holmes* (1985) and *Son of Pink Panther* (1993). In *Death before Dishonour* (1987) and *Never Say Never* (1983) the Arab woman is projected as an unscrupulous and dangerous terrorist. In *Protocol* (1984), *Death before Dishonour* (1987) and *Indiana Jones* (1989), the Arab woman is introduced only as a submissive bundle in black in the shadows.

In all these stereotypical representations, we can trace a reluctance to portray the Arab as a fully rounded character and an insistence on recycling the old Orientalist images of the past. Moreover, within all of this one can trace the attempt at inscribing the Arab race as the embodiment of brutality and incivility; this portrayal was shaped by American politics in the Middle East in the eighties and nineties. Historical and political shifts governed by attempts at economic expansion have always played a galvanizing role in how Arabs were and continue to be constructed in the media. In a way then, the 1970s U.S.-Arab oil wars, the 1980s Iranian revolution, U.S. intervention in Lebanon in 1982, the U.S. bombing of Libya in 1986, the 1990s Gulf War, the U.S. bombing of Sudan and Afghanistan in 1998 and the U.S.'s continued support of Israel are all events that propelled an agenda of U.S. expansionism in the Middle East, which directly influencing how Arab people were represented in popular cinema (Naber, *Intro.* 34).

The representations of Arabs in mass circulation magazines like *National Geographic*, further fuelled their racialized representations as shaped by the political and

cultural dynamics between the Middle East and Americans. As Little points out, *National Geographic* by the late 1920s had become a venue through which millions of middle-class Americans could perceive the world. However, this perception was shaped by old Orientalist representations. Arabs were hence constructed as essentially primitive beings stuck in a state of brutality and in need of Western intervention and aid. An example of this was, as cited by Little, the May 1923 issue which was completely devoted to the discovery of King Tutankhamen's tomb, through articles which contrasted the imperial grandness of ancient and medieval Egypt with the "hardscrabble realities" (17) of twentieth-century Egypt, without any consideration whatsoever of factors of English colonialism and its role in shaping those realities. This is why "[w]ith the waning of Britain's power and the waxing of America's after 1945, something very like Said's Orientalism seems subconsciously to have shaped U.S. popular attitudes and foreign policies toward the Middle East" (Little 10).

The Racial Politics of being Arab and American

Despite the fact that the 9/11 attacks against the Pentagon and the World Trade Center played a key role in an increasing conflation of the categories Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim and the further construction of those of Arab descent as alien, this racing of Arabs had its roots in much earlier American racial discourses. For example, Nadine Naber notes how government and media discourses on "the Arab" conflated the categories "Arab" and "Muslim" and examines how the reincarnation of European colonialist discourses portrayed Islam as a backward, uncivilized, homogenous and misogynistic toward women (2-4). Such discourses of exclusion and Arab-American

marginalization are positioned "within the context of U.S. histories of immigrant exclusion (e.g., the history of Asian exclusion, anti-Mexican racism, and Japanese internment) through which the racialization of particular immigrant groups as different than [sic] and inferior to whites has relied upon culturalist and nationalist logics that assume that 'they' (immigrants) are intrinsically unassimilable" (Naber 31). Arguably, then, one should conceive of anti-Arab racism as a fluctuating process of racial exclusion that intensifies during times of crisis. Two prominent historical moments in this process were World War II and September 11, 2001.

September 11th, however, further consolidated the binarization of Arab and American identifications, validating discourses of supposedly clashing civilizations. Hegemonic discourses on American nationalism and patriotism post 9/11 served as the intersecting point, where the discursive construction of crises and identity change crossed. As a result of this, the Arab-American community through the discursive construction of the "war on terror" rhetoric underwent an identity change. By identity change, I am referring to the process of racing through which a fairly invisible minority, categorized generally as White, experienced the plight of Blackness overnight. They were transformed from a fairly invisible community whose literature often discussed tropes of invisibility, to a highly visible potential threat. Louise Cainkar points to the many civil liberties that were rescinded as a result of this identity change after 9/11:

> [T]he US government's domestic legislative, administrative, and judicial measures implemented after September 11th have included mass arrests, secret and indefinite detentions, prolonged detention of 'material witnesses,' closed hearings and use of secret evidence, government

> eavesdropping on attorney client conversations, FBI home and work visits, wiretapping, seizures of property, removals of aliens with technical visa violations, and mandatory special registration. (1)

Scholars such as Louis Cainkar and Andrew Shryock agree that Arab-Americans have been increasingly marginalized since 9/11, they do not, however, agree on the importance and significance of theorizing Arab-Americans in relation to race in general. While Cainkar in her article, "Thinking Outside the Box," argues for the empowerment of embracing an alliance with other racial minority groups, Shryock in his article "Moral Analogies of Race," questions the empowerment of labels which can easily be used against one. They agree that Arab-Americans have had a shifting and changeable relation to race, alternating from an invisible to a highly visible group; this is a result of political, and economical correlatives throughout American history. What is needed is a move beyond the skewed realities of biological race. The Arab-American women writers and performers in this study attempt to make this move beyond biological race, while undermining the cultural stories, metaphors, and narratives that have served to culturally fix and objectify them before and after 9/11. In telling their stories, as Arab-American women shuttling between various affiliations and recasting cultural figures like Sheherazade, these writers and performers narrate "Arab-American" as a floating signifier.

As a floating signifier, Arab-American is a culturally constructed identity shaped by the politics of living the experience of Arab-ness in the American diaspora, with an understanding that this experience is itself socially constructed. Hence, the signifier Arab-American, with its physical aspects of facial features, body build, and skin pigmentation

is arbitrarily connected to a wide variety of possible signifieds or concepts, which are socially constructed through shared agreements amongst social groups. Racism works by affixing negative signifieds; however, undermining them cannot only take place by replacing those negative signifieds but rather by drawing attention to the malleability of the signification process as a whole. Within an understanding of Arab-American as a floating signifier, then, this identity position comes to convey particular historical, geographical, and political connotations that form a constructed identity under certain conditions.

It is important to point out, however, that this study's exploration of negative racialization and aesthetic resistance aims at exploring various cultural images, metaphors, and stories constructed by English translators and mainstream media in the past and Arab-American women writers's and performers's attempts of rewriting them in the present. This is why the dynamics and politics of cultural systems of race are placed under scrutiny. The racing of Arabs in popular cultural media denies Arab-Americans the space for performativity, making them biological signifiers of all that is crude, barbaric, and violent; their corporeal bodies become a page upon which negative inscriptions are carved. By analyzing the texts and performances of Arab-American women, we come to better comprehend the processes through which *The Nights* and Sheherazadian narrative can become a cultural system of er-racing biological signifiers and the negative representations that are coupled with them. These writers and performers seek to splinter Arab-American racial politics into a number of possibilities, through subversively using Sheherazadian narrative. They use their very tool of subjugation to recast the frame story that has raced them. Despite this awareness of the central role which race plays in the

lives of Arab-Americans, critics disagree regarding how Arab-Americans should position themselves in relation to race.

Arab-Americans, Black or White: Exploring the Politics of Biological Race

Critics like Louise Cainkar and Sawsan Abdulrahim have explored the outcomes of Arabs being "racialized" in the U.S., arguing that "racialization" as an analytical tool and a political agenda can help in re-shaping the representations of Arabs and Muslims in the U.S. in the past and present. Cainkar points out the need for Arab-Americans to join ranks with other minority groups, indicating that "[t]heir isolation from mainstream vehicles of dissent left them with few powerful allies to contest their treatment in American society, leaving them open targets for collective punishment after the 9/11 attacks" (80). Other critics, like Andrew Shryock, argue for the importance of considering "racialization" in relation to the present status of Arab-Americans in American society. The main goal should not merely be to fit Arab-Americans into a clear racial category, but rather to explore how "racialization," as an analytical tool for reassessing white and black racial categories, can also lead to marginalization.

Cainkar argues that racially categorizing Arabs as white is counter-productive, since not all Arabs can pass as such, or even identify as such. They are not treated as Whites and at the same time are deprived of inclusions into affirmative action policies: "Arabs have experienced the double burden of being excluded from whiteness *and* from mainstream recognition as people of color" (80). Furthermore, as Cainkar points out, the racialization processes experienced by Arab-Americans postdates the exclusions of other negatively racialized groups. Their racialization hence differs in historical timing and

pretext since some of the earliest Arab-American immigrants were eligible for homestead lands and legal and voting rights (Cainkar 47). On the other hand, Shryock mentions that "Many Arabs and Muslims believe their 'second-class status' is a political effect that should not be confused with the racism faced by black Americans and other historically oppressed people of color" (83). However, I feel the need to qualify this statement about distinguishing between groups being marginalized as a result of their governments and political ideologies, and groups being marginalized as a result of biological markers of race. I find it difficult to draw a clear line between discrimination against political ideology and personal racialization, because each of these components affects the other. That is, it is often those with whom we disagree ideologically and politically that become raced in the negative sense. We cannot separate the ideological from the racial in instances of racism because racism functions through a collapsing of the lines between ideological and political apparatuses and physical markers of race.

Arguably, then, the Arab-American example can provide researchers with a case for analyzing the constructedness of race and how there can be an interrelationship between racializing processes, politics, and ideology. A necessary means for Arab-Americans to counter these processes is the formation of coalitions with other minority groups, in order to forge a space for themselves within race and ethnic studies. Such a move works to counter the views of some race and ethnic studies scholars, who attempt to disqualify Arab-Americans as viable subjects under the rubric of race studies. For example, Martin Marger (2003) argues that Arab-Americans are responsible for their own stereotyping as a result of the 9/11 attacks (165). Marger's analysis wrongly makes a violent fringe group representative of a very diverse group of people of various ethnicities

and religions. In this, he is denying Arabs a heterogeneous subject position because, for him, they only represent a violent collectivity. Such a move, on his behalf, counters the primary goal of race studies in opening up and exploring such collectivities. Cainkar traces the questionable roots of such statements as Marger's regarding collective responsibility arguing, "[t]he public attribution of collective responsibility require[s] an understanding that collective status trumps the individual. This collective phenomenon is reserved for persons from cultures represented as backward or barbaric, where persons operate in [...] mechanical solidarity" (51). Denying Arabs the possibility of individual ideological viewpoints and treating them as a collective is hence an example of detrimental racialization. This is why the backlash against Arabs post 9/11 was regarded as questionable and discriminatory by many race scholars:

> [T]here is no doubt that concerns about personal safety and national security were behind some of the backlash and government policies that followed the 9/11 attacks. [However] it is [...] their unbridled collective nature, their inclination to target anyone who appeared to be part of *the group*, that makes these responses racialized. (Cainkar 52)

Cainkar hence reaches the conclusion that Arabs need to be removed from the "white" category in Census Bureau statistics because this hides the discrimination they face. After all when some Arabs choose the "other" category and write in Arab, they are still coded as "white" by the Census Bureau (62-63).

Andrew Shryock, on the other hand, sees the creation of a new category, in Census Bureau statistics for Arabs, as dangerous because it opens the venue for abuse by authorities. He warns as Edward Said did against "the false comfort of labels" (112). Such

labels only provide a beginning point and never really an end to identity; after all, ascribing to either "white" or "black" categories is "vacuous and reductive," according to Shryock (112). Arguably, then, being Arab-American depends not so much on certain features and skin pigmentation, but rather upon the political, social, and economic correlatives shaping this identity position at a particular historical moment. These correlatives shape the representations of Arabs in popular cultural venues. Hence, if being Arab in the seventies was shaped by the oil wars, creating the greedy sheikh stereotype, being Arab post 9/11 further fuelled the Arab the Pre 9/11 terrorist stereotype. By advocating for a distinct Arab racial category, one would be yielding to an understanding of race as only a physical and biological marker, instead of extending an interpretation of race as a cultural system of stories, metaphors, and images framed in time.

Race and Sheherazade

Sheherazade's story was translated in England in parallel to England's nineteenth century imperialistic designs and the Orientalist discursive practices contiguous to them, since increasing industrialization created a growing need for markets and raw materials to encourage the colonization process. Hence, it was convenient to interpret the frame tale as an expression of Arab women's passive objectivity to justify colonizing schemes. According to this Orientalist interpretation, just as Sheherazade was held captive by Shahriyar, Arab women were held captive by their cultures. Mohja Kahf argues that by the nineteenth century, the Muslim woman predominantly became a fetish: "a glamorous, shining prize to be sought after and acquired through virile competition with other members of the male world" (*Western Representations* 153). This Orientalist

representation reflects how the Arab and Muslim woman became the epitome of the effeminization of the Muslim world, which English colonialism sought to conquer. She became a convenient conduit for Orientalism, "a diaphanous non-being who reveals what Islamic despotism does to effeminate 'Oriental' man. She is a lesson in what Enlightened Western man congratulates himself he has been able to avoid-although he is not above deriving voyeuristic pleasure from her, both as narrator and reader" (Kahf, *Western Representations* 138). The nineteenth-century translations of *The Nights* participated in denying Sheherazade agency and ignored her active role in choosing her destiny and marrying the king. Moreover, through gradual changes and side-note additions, Sheherazade was reduced to a sexual object through the conflation of her with Shahriyar's first wife and the Lady of the Rings. Her intellectual abilities in the original Arabic text are diminished, as she is gradually raced and racialized into the stereotype of Arab woman as a passive, oppressed sexual object.

Contemporary Arab-American critic, Fedwa Malti-Douglas, attempts to reclaim subjectivity for Sheherazade, by arguing that her narrative is an empowering manipulation of text and desire. Malti-Douglas studies the implications and politics involved in recasting Sheherazade's narrative, by foregrounding how Sheherazade controls narrative and Shahriyar's desire. She gestures at the salient characteristic that has attracted so many writers to Sheherazade's frame tale, which is the power politics within it. This power politics is exemplified in the relation between Sheherazade, Shahriyar, and the tales. The dynamics of this power politics is diminished by the nineteenth-century English translators who usurp Sheherazade's narrative power. In contemporary Arab-American women's writing and performance, the dynamics of Sheherazade's relation to

Shahriyar and the tales become a source of empowerment. As Sheherazade regains the role and power of the storyteller, her narrative becomes an active tool in questioning the stereotypes through which she has become raced in the past translations and in popular American cultural forms like Hollywood film and magazines like *National Geographic*.

Sheherazade, Text, and Desire

Fedwa Malti-Douglas explores the connections of Sheherazade's tale in relation to desire, storytelling, and reappropriation, inspecting the gender power politics involved in the recastings of this tale. Malti-Douglas encourages an interpretation of Sheherazade, in the original frame narrative, as a figure controlling the relationship between Shahriyar's desire and text. For her, then, Sheherazade is not only an intellectual or a seductress but a figure who melds these two powers together, using her body and words to meet and quell Shahriyar's violent desire. Sheherazade hence represents a different model of femininity than Shahriyar's first wife or the Lady of the rings. According to Malti-Douglas, "Shahrazad is unlike all the previous females presented in the text. They embodied physical desire that was purely sexual, expressed in the most direct manner possible" (*Woman's Body* 21). However, Sheherazade extends beyond the body. She is best described as a manipulator of narrative desire because she continually attracts through her storytelling, without fulfilling or satisfying the need for resolution by ending the story. She hence initiates "the transition from sex to text" (*Woman's Body* 23). Despite this control over the text, Malti-Douglas hesitates in designating Sheherazade as "a model of Arabic woman's authorship" since she has not created her text but has merely learned it and is transmitting it (*Woman's Body* 23). However, in reducing Sheherazade's creative

abilities only to the recitation of the accumulated wisdom of her civilization, Malti-Douglas reduces the variety of possible authorial positions and artistic forms that can be assumed by writers. It is true that we are told at the outset of *The Nights* that Sheherazade is highly educated and knowledgeable; however, this does not mean that she is merely regurgitating the tales and poetry she has learned without introducing any changes. In fact, we may consider her attempt to distance herself from her stories to be an intentional ruse on her behalf. Through this ruse, she can avoid direct authorship of the tales to avoid Shahriyar's possible anger.

Arguably, then, Sheherazade can still be read in relation to a model of Arab women's authorship because of her control over the storytelling process. She initiates the storytelling process every night, through planning with Dunyazad to ask her to tell a tale. She decides how long the story should be, shaping it within the time constraints of night till sunrise every night. Moreover, she chooses which tale to tell Shahriyar each night. All of these steps give her control over the storytelling process as well as authorship. Despite Malti-Douglas's hesitation in considering Sheherazade, in the original frame tale, as a model for Arab women's authorship, she designates a pivotal and creative role for Sheherazadian narrative in contemporary Arab women's writing:

> Rejuvenated, manipulated, and redefined, she and her cohorts from the frame of the *Nights* [...] have now transcended their original literary environment [...] And just as Shahrazad found herself caught in a delicate game of sexual politics in the frame of the *Nights*, so does she now find herself the pawn in an equally delicate game of gender and creativity, but this time on a universal scale. ("Shahrazad feminist" 40)

Consequently, the revival of Sheherazadian narrative in contemporary diasporic writing and performance transcends and extends the text/desire dynamics of the original frame tale. It extends the text/desire dynamics of Sheherazade's frame tale, by applying the power politics between Sheherazade, Shahriyar, and text to a new historical and social context. Arab-American women writers and performers achieve this through recasting Sheherazadian narrative, to subvert Orientalist and racialized representations of themselves and their cultures. The power dynamics of this narrative are an inspirational source for many writers. Writers from the East and West and of both genders have appropriated the dynamics of the frame tale, some of them presenting Sheherazade as "the prototypical woman whose existence permits Arab women to speak" ("Shahrazad feminist" 40).

These recastings of Sheherazade reinscribe the malleability of her ephemeral, empowered storytelling, which through improvisation allowed her to weave desire and words to reinvent the king. Such a rejuvenation of Sheherazade's narrative shows that sexual politics survive the test of time as they are revived in new social and historical contexts since "[e]ach recasting, in its own way, undercuts the medieval male scribe's agenda [...] demonstrat[ing] that the recasting of the world-famous frame story is not an innocent act" ("Shahrazad feminist" 53). This very recasting of Sheherazade's frame tale becomes a means of regaining the malleability of Sheherazade's nightly narration, since each recasting is a continuation of the infinite storytelling. Though Sheherazade and her narrative have a particular meaning contingent to the desire and narrative situation in *The Nights*, each time this Sheherazadian narrative is retold it appropriates that dynamic of desire and narration to a new historical context. Moreover, newer aggregations of

accumulated experiences are reshaped in the form of the Sheherazadian narrative. Authorship, in this sense, can never be regarded as the creation of something entirely new, but rather the reshaping of old tales to new contexts. Such an understanding of storytelling is central to how the Sheherazadian narrative is currently re-appropriated by Arab-American women writers and performers, to figure the dynamics of race and affiliation within the diasporic context. This recasting by Arab-American women writers and performers of Sheherazadian narrative is also a continuation of a tradition of Arab women's re-writings of Sheherazade's tale.

Sheherazadian Narrative and Negotiating Race in the Arab-American Diaspora

Finally, it is important to point out that transformation and change are central to Sheherazade's narrative because she tells the story with the goal of change in mind. This is an aspect of her narrative strategy that makes it conducive to contemporary Arab-American women's recastings of her, which are often activist-oriented. Arguably, then, Sheherazade's narrative and her storytelling techniques are molded by these women writers and performers to explore issues of cultural translation that "reinforce boundaries between seemingly separate worlds or break down barriers between cultures [...] contribut[ing] to the fates of entire peoples whose images they shape and reshape" (Gauch 135). It is within this milieu that race imposes itself as a central site for contesting how Arab-Americans, as a diaspora, figure their identity positions and their affiliations. Race, as a social construct governed by particular historical and political events, becomes an important marker through which Arab-American women writers and performers explore their representations in society and attempt to reshape them.

Naber points to the centrality of exploring Arab-American relations to race because of "a pattern within dominant U.S. discourses such as corporate media and federal government discourse [...] by which the 'Arab,' who was once positioned as white, but not quite, has come to signify Otherness more than ever before" (*Introduction* 39). Such a political and historical context of increasingly reductive representations validates Arab-American women writers' and performers' engagements with race, orientalism, and their resistance to gendered stereotypes. However, to what extent can an exploration of race invigorate discussion of the tenuous, multiple, and sometimes contradictory ways that Arab-Americans and Arab-American women in particular negotiate their positioned identities and their various affiliations? To what extent can the Sheherazadian narrative be conceived as a racial discourse of resistance? These are some of the questions that the following chapters will explore.

Chapter 2

Cooking Sheherazade's America: Figuring Arab-American Women's Diasporic Narratives in Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent*

"I guess I'm always looking for my home, a little bit. I mean, even though I live here, I have this feeling that my real home is somewhere else somehow"- Diana Abu-Jaber, *Crescent* 132

The above words articulated by Sirine, the main character in Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent*, convey a diasporic experience of negotiating cultural identities, which results from the dispersal of people and their intimate journeys.[30] Within the Arab-American context - particularly the Iraqi-American context - these journeys remain fraught, due to the current historical and political ramifications of the 9/11 attacks which have shaped and continue to shape the lives of Arab-Americans.[31] Abu-Jaber's strategy of using an interruptive

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[30] Critical reception of her work has been very positive. She received a 2004 PEN Center USA award for literary fiction, a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship and a Fulbright research award. *Crescent* was named one of the top noteworthy novels of 2003 by *Christian Science Monitor*. See *Contemporary Authors Online,* "Diana Abu-Jaber."

[31] Abu-Jaber belongs to a Jordanian-American diaspora. Jordanians did not begin to immigrate significantly to the U.S. till the 1950s. This is due to the ongoing conflict with Israel. In 1967, Jordan along with Egypt, Syria, and Iraq lost the West Bank and Jerusalem to Israel which led to waves of migration to the U.S. The current state between the U.S. and Jordan is mostly friendly. In *Crescent,* Abu-Jaber chooses to deal with the cultural negotiations of the Iraqi-American

Sheherazadian narrative that weaves into the main narrative seeks to reinvent prevalent racialized representations of Arabs. Through recasting tales, stock characters and well-known figures associated with *The Nights* and paralleling them to Sirine's culinary practices, "[f]ood functions effectively as a system of communication," through which it becomes an "ordered system parallel to other cultural systems and infuse[s] them with meaning" (Counihan 20). A great deal of diasporic women's writing tradition is concerned with negotiating identities, affiliations, and cultures through food. The Arab-American and Arab-Canadian feminists's anthology *Food for Our Grandmothers* is an example of such a tendency through its interspersal of recipes with poetry and prose. As Sirine's own expression of the Sheherazadian narrative, culinary practices become a site where Arab and American affiliations are negotiated. Despite arguments that women's relationship to food is shaped by oppression, some feminist critics argue that food can become a creative venue since cooking can be "a vehicle for artistic expression, a source of sensual pleasure, an opportunity for resistance and even power" (Avakian, *Intro.* 6). Despite the fact that food can be an exotic trope, Sirine's relationship to food and narrative in this novel expresses a complexity which surpasses the culinary ethnic novel genre and its exoticization of food and ethnicity. Unlike her earlier novel *The Language of Baklava* which was intersperced with recipes, in *Crescent* the recipes and ingredients are more covertly woven into the narrative as storytelling, cooking and cultural negotiation blend together. Sirine attempts to figure her identity positions through "cuisine"; it is interesting to note here that because "cuisine" means transformation, it is

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diaspora which has been shaped by a much more fraught historical and political relationship as a result of the first Gulf War (1991-1995) and the second Gulf War (2003-present).

quite appropriate for it to metaphorically facilitate identity transformations. However, such transformations are plagued by the political and historical backdrop of a post 9/11 world.

The curious history of Diana Abu-Jaber's publication of the novel *Crescent*, (2003) is proof of the problematics which inevitably influence attempts at imagining an Arab-American - particularly an Iraqi-American diasporic identity - within the context of an ongoing war in Iraq. In an interview with Abu-Jaber, Andrea Shalal-Esa introduces us to Diana Abu-Jaber's mixed diasporic background. She is a second generation Arab-American, with an immigrant Jordanian father and a German-Irish U.S.-born mother. Diana's paternal grandmother came from Bethlehem; her grandfather came from a Bedouin family in Jordan. Abu-Jaber grew up just outside Syracuse, New York, negotiating Arab and American identities (Shalal-Esa, "An Interview with Diana Abu-Jaber"). Wail Hassan's 2003 review of *Crescent* discusses the political environment of the novel's release pointing out that though it was"[c]ompleted before the terrorist attacks of 9/11/2001, the novel seems to have anticipated them, so much so that both author and publisher saw fit to delay the publication by one-and-a-half- years" (31). The novel was released simultaneously with the American invasion of Iraq in the second gulf war in 2003, as Arabs in the U.S. became more directly caught within the context of the outsider within. This does not suggest that there are absolutely no attempts at resistant dispersion of stereotypes by members of the community, since Arab-American writers and performers are constantly encouraging a dispersion of Arab stereotypes. By dispersion I am referring to identity as an experience of dispersion through which, national and diasporic affiliations are revealed as a spectrum. In an interview with Robin Field Diana Abu Jaber states

her "social agenda" to be challenging stereotypes, "When I wrote the book it was all pre-9/11 [...] I had just read an essay by Edward Said, too, about how the Arab was the last ethnicity that it was okay to denigrate [...] people are so afraid of difference; they're so afraid of people who look different or sound different. If there's any social agenda in what I do, that is probably the number one thing: trying to counteract the media portrayals" (219).

It is important to point out though that 9/11 did not initiate anti-Arab racism since it long preceded this date. However, as Steven Salaita argues, "9/11 provided an ostensibly empirical pretext to legitimize anti-Arab racism, but in no way did 9/11 actually create anti-Arab racism; 9/11 merely validated it" (*Arab-American* 111). The Sheherazadian narrative, as an interruptive diasporic narrative interspersing the main narrative about Sirine the Iraqi-American chef, works to question fixed conceptions of race and belonging through subverting set notions of identity and imagining partiality and the hyphen as viable spaces for existence and creating social change.

Imagining Dispersed Diasporic Identities: Opening up the Arab-American Diaspora

In identifying Abu-Jaber as a diasporic writer, I am aware of the possible contentiousness surrounding such a categorization especially with the often particularly specified history of the term as a reference to forced dislocation exemplified in the histories of the forced geographical dislocations of the African, Jewish, and Palestinian diasporas. Abu-Jaber only spent a brief period of her life in Jordan and speaks the Jordanian dialect only to some degree. However, I believe her claim to being a diasporic writer lies mostly in this incompleteness shaping her negotiations of cultures as represented culturally and linguistically in *Crescent.* Pnina Werbner describes this state of

incompleteness, which does not necessarily require resolution, as a "dual centrality" which a diasporic community organizes by maintaining transnational connections and loyalties to an original homeland and a new homeland so that "[d]iasporas, it seems, are both ethnic-parochial and cosmopolitan. The challenge remains, however, to disclose how the tension between these two tendencies is played out in actual situations" (15, 6). This diasporic organization functions both on practical material levels, with attempts for example to lobby politically as well as on conceptual levels through experiencing a sense of affiliation and longing for another homeland. Accordingly, an Arab-American diasporic "imagined community" or nation is multi-dimensional because it claims several possible homelands.[32] As Benedict Anderson believed that the nation is socially constructed and imagined by its people, so can we also derive that an Arab-American diaspora is imagined; however, this imagined community transcends borders, unlike the nation which is limited by finite borders. An analysis of the recasting of key cultural narratives such as the "Sheherazadian narrative," which recurs in the works of diasporic writers like Diana Abu-Jaber and Mohja Kahf, attempts to display the permeability between Arab and American identity positions in the diaspora. Such a move defies the racing of Arabs in mainstream cultural productions. The Sheherazadian narrative, which had been used by Arab women writers in the past as a narrative of resistance against patriarchal and colonial structures, further develops to become a narrative which

[32] I borrow the terms imagined community as a definition of nation from Benedict Anderson. Other critics question Benedict Anderson's idea of nation as an imagined community because "he glosses over the 'divisiveness' of class, 'race' and ideology [...] Furthermore, he does not ask about the type of imagination at work in this project" (Bannerji 65).

questions representations of diasporic individuals and racialized interpretations of identity.[33] Critics like Stuart Hall (1996) and Kwame Anthony Appiah (2005) conceive of such recastings of narratives as contingent to a politics of representation, which involves the production of identities through processes of representation. An exploration of such politics of representation is paramount because it works to uncover how "[r]acial distinctions become so rountinized that a racial hierarchy is maintained without requiring the component of individual actors" (Razack 9). Sherene Razack describes this routinization of racial hierarchy as "race thinking," distinguishing it from racism as a more general phenomenon, through which some groups are represented as having a greater innate capacity for rationality than others, through an essentialization of racial markers.

The Nights has been framed by Western translators and culture as a tool for the propagation of such "race thinking" through Orientalism. Consequently, it becomes the role of critics to explore how and why such translations took place and continue to take place in mainstream American culture. It is the main aim of this study to attempt to reveal the Orientalist discursive practices shaping cultural translations of Sheherazade in mainstream American culture, through resistant Arab-American women's writing which is directed at stereotypical representations of Arab women. Arab-American diaspora writers, like Diana Abu-Jaber, appropriate the Sheherazadian narrative of *The Nights* to resist such practices.

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[33] I am referring here to a resistant re-writing that Arab-American women writers are producing by assuming the storytelling techniques, narratives, or orality of Sheherazade of *The Nights* and appropriating it to their own diasporic context.

Attempts at creating racial hierarchies through the lens of descent are undercut through foregrounding the constructedness of identity. However, this constructedness is not completely unregulated because both structure and malleability are involved. Metaphorically speaking, for a door to open it needs a hinge. This understanding of the dynamic relationship between structure and malleability echoes Homi Bhabha's conceptualization of nation as narration. Such an understanding of diasporic identity foregrounds the ever-changing, incomplete, performative aspects of diasporic affiliation and its contested relationship to nationalism. In this way, the metaphor of the crescent in Abu-Jaber's novel, and what it suggests with regards to a state of incompleteness, approaching an ever possible completeness, encapsulates how the dynamics of performative and stabilizing pedagogical aspects of nation interact in Abu-Jaber's grappling with Arab and American identities.

Understanding such performances of identity and what they entail becomes a necessity; questions regarding the limits of citizenship and affiliation for Arab-Americans within a particular historical context impose themselves. Citizenship, as a form of affiliation and obligation, is deconstructed to reveal hierarchical categorizations within it, which in moments of crisis reveal that those who dress and look differently from the hegemony are accepted only upon a probationary level. Ironically, then, the radical fringe becomes representative of a diverse collective.[34] Within such an understanding of

[34] Darcy Zabel points out that despite the Bush government's urging citizens to refrain from racial violence against Americans of Arab descent, "scholars continue to debate the long-term impact of the Domestic Security Enhancement Act (also known as the Patriot Act) on Arab Americans in the United States today. Political situations such as this continue to affect the Arab American

citizenship, cultural identities and national identities are represented in a binary relationship. This is exemplified in Steven Salaita's argument that "[a]fter 9/11, Americans turned increasingly toward [...] reflections on 9/11 that compartmentalized human suffering and rendered the American tragedy exceptional-as a means of reinforcing a national identity made universal in the image of the majoritarian elite institutionalizing Arab-Americans as the other within" (*Arab American* 24).

However, *Crescent* explores how affiliations can no longer be derived from essentialized identities, but rather through the structured and yet malleable relation between affiliations. Within this fictional context, Sirine the main protagonist concurrently experiences both her American and Arab identity positions. The problematics of ascribing to an essentialized identity are increasingly contested. In figuring diasporic identity positions, such as Arab-American, "neither the picture in which there is just an authentic nugget of selfhood, the core that is distinctively me, waiting to be dug out, nor the notion that I can simply make up any self I choose, should tempt us [...] we make up selves from a tool kit of options made available by our culture and society" (Appiah 107). What shapes this dynamics is what we figure as our "parameters" or what we regard as having a successful life and our "limits" or what we define as the barriers that detain us from acquiring what our parameters help in shaping;

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experience of the Americas and one's sense of what it means to be a member of the Arab diaspora" (7). Accordingly, the heterogeneity and hybridity of these citizens is denied as they are exempted even of their probationary status, reduced to a homogeneous threatening group, and interpellated as the outsider within.

the relation between these two is constantly shifting (Appiah 111). Sirine's uncle points to the transformative function of Sheherazadian narrative as a narrative which incurs change, "Habeebti, here is something you have to understand about stories: They can point you in the right direction but they can't take you all the way there" (384). In these words, the uncle reinvents the workings of a diasporic narrative which does not ethnocentrically impose a particular path, but merely directs and suggests. Some critics suggest that current reinterpretations of Sheherazade and her narrative by contemporary writers attempt to "reject the authority of those European translators and scholars who sought to embody Scheherazade and her tales definitively in a determinate, finite, and final work [...] indeterminacy constitutes not a flaw to be overcome but an inspiration" (Gauch xi). Along these lines, the figuration of Sheherazadian narrative in the writings and performances of Arab-American women and performers in the diaspora is an interesting site where such "parameters" and "limits" are explored.

Culinary Narratives: Sheherazade's Recipe for Cultural Negotiations

As an act of cultural translation, then, *Crescent* seeks to translate Arab-American cultural experiences, drawing attention to the contested position of Arab-American women against the historical backdrop of the first War in Iraq (1991). By arguing that *Crescent* is an act of cultural translation, I am applying Appiah's understanding of a cultural translation as being the capacity to grasp narrative logic and construct the world with our imagination.

Accordingly, cultural translation takes place when we come to understand others through their narratives; Sheherazadian narrative is an example of such a narrative. What

Abu-Jaber explores is the discrepancies between Sheherazadian narrative as translated by nineteenth- century translators like Richard Burton and the Sheherazadian narrative that Sirine experiences and expresses in her cooking. Many diasporic women writers have explored negotiating their identity positions through food. Ester Rebeca Shapiro describes how food is a conduit for recreating traditions: "I have become a fanatical cook and in the creative process of cooking have found a way to reconcile [...] contradictions. As a cook, I can achieve a rich and harmonious unity in my struggle to make sense of my conflicting identities" (Shapiro 169). We can discern in Sirine's Sheherazadian narrative, the dynamics of such cultural translation. The forty-year-old protagonist Sirine, daughter of an American mother and an Iraqi father, explores the intricate crossings between American and Arab cultures as she cooks Middle Eastern food in a café and falls in love with the Arabic literature professor Hanif (Han). Towards the end of the main narrative, Hanif decides to return to Iraq to visit the remainder of his family despite the fact that his life is endangered because of his former writings against Saddam Hussein's regime. Throughout, the main narrative of Sirine's American experience is interrupted by the Sheherazadian. In this manner, the novel's structure literally performs the multi-directional processes of affiliation shaping diasporic living.

An important component shaping Sirine's chimerical diasporic experience is her creative recreation of the Sheherazadian narrative within a culinary context. Sirine's relationship to "cuisine" can be described as transformational, since she gradually develops from a study of Italian and French cuisine, to the Arabic foods of her childhood, to an interest in an amalgamation of different cultures and a growing preoccupation with Medieval Arabic cuisine. As she experiences the Sheherazadian narrative, she recreates

its hybridizing and evolutionary effect upon her through food. This is a rather gendered mode of expression, which seems on some levels to reduce Sirine's creative potential to a domestic activity. However, throughout the novel in Sirine's description of foods and cooking we feel very much involved in an empowering and artistic enterprise rather than a domestic one. Cooking is foregrounded as one of the major sites of cultural production and redefinition. Sirine describes her own social development through her cooking, referring to it in terms of the different bolder flavours she begins using. For example, she points out towards the end of the novel that "[s]he has started to taste her own cooking in a professional way again. Detached, critical, and overly scrupulous [*sic*]. Her flavours have gotten somehow stranger, darker and larger" (385). In a sense, Sirine narrates her negotiations of identities in her cooking, redefining the Sheherazadian narrative as a gastronomical experience of intermingling complex flavours.

In an interview with Luan Gaines, Abu-Jaber designates "food and storytelling" as central aspects of her Arab cultural education. In *Crescent* she parallels these two forms of cultural expression through tales about cultural negotiation and Sirine's creative negotiations in her culinary output. Accordingly, the Sheherazadian narrative, which lies at the intersection of storytelling and Sirine's culinary experience, becomes a diasporic narrative in terms of what Werbner refers to as "long-term diasporas creat[ing] collective literary genres, symbolic representations, historical narratives of loss and redemption [...] that are uniquely theirs" (17). The reference to Laura Esquivel's novel *Like Water for Chocolate* in which food becomes, in a magical realist context, a mode of expression is indicative of the central role food plays in *Crescent*, "Mireille gives Sirine [...] a book

about a woman who cried into her cooking and infected her guests with her emotions" (385).

The fluent, composite exercises associated with food production and consumption, make Sirine's culinary practices a conduit for cultural translation; food can tell a story. The lonely tasks of preparing lentils, baba ghannuj, fava bean dip, laban sauce and eggplant do not sufficiently express these negotiations. Only through sharing food with a community of friends and customers can food become a site of cultural translation. This cross-cultural mixing of cuisines and communities, during the production and consumption of food makes cooking a metaphorical *dihliz*, a threshold space, which allows for an understanding of diaspora as an experience where the many lives we have lived and are living can intermingle. Such an understanding of Arab-American diasporic communities and their affiliations undercuts the roots of race-thinking. In the description of the Arab-influenced Thanksgiving which Sirine hosts, Abu-Jaber succinctly describes such a translational experience, by referring to Sirine's experimentation with seemingly discordant flavours as a metaphor for diasporic existence.

Food and belonging are metaphorically intertwined as Aziz, the Syrian poet, and Sirine describe attempts to understand others in culinary metaphors: "[T]asting a piece of bread that someone bought is like looking *at* that person, but tasting a piece of bread that they baked is like looking out of their eyes [...] Cooking and tasting is a metaphor for seeing. Your cooking reveals America to us non-Americans. And vice versa" (221). Moreover, Victor, Sirine's co-worker at Nadia's café describes her cooking metaphorically as a culinary process through which seemingly discordant flavours are combined revealing the distinctness of each flavour. This culinary activity, through which

different flavours emphasize one another, creating a complex tasting experience, while concurrently working individually to excite different taste buds, can be compared to the Arab-American attempt at negotiating the different "limits" and "parameters" shaping their identities, against the political backdrop of the war in Iraq. Accordingly, the paradoxical situation of negotiating Iraqi and American identity positions, in the current political and historical stage of neo-imperialism, is rather similar to the culinary experience of "pulling apart" described by Victor: "Chef cooks like we do. In Mexico, we put cinnamon in with the chocolate and pepper in the sweetcakes, so things pull apart" (221).

It is this "pulling apart," which accentuates seemingly contrary affiliations that lie at the heart of Arab-American diasporic experience presently; moreover, this accentuating "pulling apart" is how narratives function in *Crescent.* The interjections about life, storytelling, and belonging in the lives of Camille and Abdelrahman, the main characters in the interruptive Sheherazadian narrative, underscore the cultural negotiations in the main narrative about Sirine. Seteney Shami gestures at the complex relationship between nationalism and diaspora, arguing that diaspora draws attention to the inchoate nature of nationalism (114). By inchoate nationalism here Shami refers to the ambiguous state of the contemporary nation-state within the context of globalization. In fact, Shami refers to the nation-state as "embattled simultaneously from above and from below. From above, transnational linkages and solidarities make national boundaries increasingly permeable [...] From below, discourses of statism are appropriated by subordinated peoples" (103). She also argues that because the new homeland is being produced by people who are simultaneously involved in multiple settings and polities. This means that rather than the

construction of a bounded space, there is the construction of an interpenetrated and fragmented field of action (114). Accordingly, the diasporic narrative is a narrative of historical positionality shaped by specific contexts of migration and the politics of location of the migrant group in relation to the dominant group; the 2003 war in Iraq shapes this novel's historicized portrayal of Arab-American and particularly Iraqi diasporic experience in the U.S. since the choice of possible return to one's original homeland is not possible. Moreover, the tensions involved in assuming an American identity become more pronounced.

Within the main narrative, recounting Sirine's life as a cook who is constantly experimenting with the ingredients of different cultures (cooking an Arabic feast on Thanksgiving), the impermeability of an essentialist holistic sense of national identity and hierarchies based upon descent are revealed as false and misleading. Sirine is a second generation Arab-American who is ethnically white because of her American mother, speaks little Arabic, and whose relationship with her father's Iraqi, Arab identity is confined to her creative Middle Eastern food concoctions. The interruption of her life narrative by the adventures of Abdelrahman Salahadin alias Omar Sharif and his mother Aunt Camille, with their many quests and travels, foregrounds the performativity involved in constructing an Arab-American identity position and how Orientalist processes trouble that.

The Diasporic Directions of Sheherazadian Narrative in *Crescent*

By Sheherazadian narrative I am referring to the life-sustaining narrative articulated by Sheherazade of *One Thousand and One Nights* (1885) which through

continuous storytelling reinvents the ruler Shahriyar. As a therapeutic narrative, it works to cure Shahriyar of his violence and doubts by creating tales that critique his behaviour, through tactical storytelling. In Abu-Jaber's text, the Sheherazadian narrative is shifted into a diasporic space, which seeks to blur boundaries of "race-thinking" and Orientalism, which have shaped and continue to shape translations of *The Nights* and Arabs in mainstream cultural representations.

It becomes a means through which Abu-Jaber negotiates for herself and her protagonists a space between the popularly represented Sheherazade of exoticization and submission and the Sheherazade of actual lived experience in the diaspora. Simultaneously, she embodies the precarious situation of shuttling between these representations. The importance of studying the ramifications of stereotypes upon Muslim and Arab-Americans lives is the normativity allowed to such negative positions. If racism and cultural essentialism seek to create monolithic representations, the Sheherazadian narrative functions to fracture these unified representations. By invoking Sheherazade's narrative technique, which encourages "boundary-crossing, multidirectional, [and] ever-evolving analysis," Abu-Jaber challenges the racial hierarchies which contend that the East is a static and unchanging place (Gauch xiii). An analysis of Arab-American women's diasporic affiliations is particularly important now because, as Steven Salaita argues, Arab-Americans post 9/11 have evolved from an "invisible" to a highly "visible" group that "directly or indirectly affects America's so-called culture wars, foreign policy, presidential elections, and legislative tradition" (*Arab American* 110). In the current historical context of the U.S. occupation of Iraq, the rhetoric used to justify the U.S. invasion of Iraq very much echoes late nineteenth-century colonialist rhetoric in which

the act of occupation is represented as an act of civilization, which will bring democracy and modernity to Iraq. The narrative techniques of this novel, however, constantly draw attention to the fact that Iraq and its people are not frozen back in "Baghdadi *Arabian Nights*" time. In dealing with stereotypes, Abu-Jaber says, "I push on stereotypes. I will deliberately press on those long-held clichés as a way of testing them" (Field,"A Prophet in her own Town" 211). Nathan, a photographer and friend of Sirine, relates his initial shock in Iraq, encapsulating an Orientalist superficiality which still shapes the representations of Arabs. He describes Iraqis saying, "they were so alive - I mean, lots of them didn't have TV or telephones, but everyone talked about politics, art, religion, you name it. They were living under a dictatorship but their inner selves stayed *alive*" (99).

Situating a Home: "Hollywood" and "Tehrangeles"

Hollywood and Um-Nadia's Café in "Tehrangeles" are the two main settings of *Crescent's* Sheherazadian narrative and main narrative. They form different diasporic centers in Los Angeles, California. By invoking Hollywood as one of the main settings of the Sheherazadian narrative, the fantastic *Nights* melds into the hues of twenty-first-century mainstream American culture. We are told that Abdelrahman Salahadin, the main protagonist of the interruptive Sheherazadian narrative, works in Hollywood for forty years as a movie star and could possibly be Omar Sharif (382). It is quite indicative that Salahadin moves to Hollywood and becomes an actor, as it is within this mainstream media form that the stereotypical Arab is produced. One cannot help but wonder if his acting is a reincarnation of Abdelrahman's original occupation of selling himself into slavery. In Hollywood, he enslaves himself once more by enacting the same stereotypical

roles. Only through being scripted as the fetishized "Oriental" can Abdelrahman be welcomed in this town. Only by repeating that he comes from "A small barbaric people!" can he be accepted (337).[35]

Through Abdelrahman Salahadin's experiences of acting in Hollywood, we can trace the role fetishism plays in the representation of identities. Fetishism involves a disavowal through which desire is simultaneously indulged and denied. As Stuart Hall argues, "[f]etishism, [...] is a strategy for having-it-both-ways: for both representing and not-representing the tabooed, dangerous" ("The Spectacle of the Other" 268). Accordingly, the fetishized representations of the "Arab," in Hollywood movies in the past and present, are part of an organizing system which erases cultural identities while simultaneously representing them. Hollywood or "Hal'Awud" as it is described in the novel is initially introduced to Abdelrahman Salahadin through the exaggerated rantings of his friend Crazyman al-Rashid in the Mermaid land of Na. The mermaids describe this land as "the terrible and frightening land of the setting sun" where Salahadin ends his travels (214). Hollywood is transcribed throughout the narrative as "Hal'Awud," which in Arabic is a transcription of the question "will I return?" On one level, then, Salahadin, the main protagonist of the Sheherazadian narrative, dwells in a land of fetishized misrepresentations of himself, which triggers within him the diasporic experience of constantly questioning where home is. He becomes immersed in his own stereotypical recreations of himself in this place and constantly questions if he should escape them and leave. As a town of representation, Hollywood is described as a "Babylon" where

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[35] See Ahmed Ahmed, actor/Stand-up comedian's interview in Jack Shaheen's *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People.*

"streams of languages and voices" cross one another (320). Such a reference suggests the complexities of communication in this town of representation. Accordingly, by introducing Hollywood as one of the main settings of her Sheherazadian narrative, Abu-Jaber directly questions the position of the "Arab" in mainstream media. The readers are introduced to the kinds of roles Abdelrahman Salahadin would be asked to act: "Back then the directors and producers didn't think of Arabs as terrorists, [since] they thought Arabs were more like something from the Bible" (336). This media setting is hence where Arabs assume either dehumanized or distanced identities.[36]

"Tehrangeles," on the other hand, or the Irani sector of Los Angeles, where Um-Nadia's Arabic café is situated, represents the more positive and welcoming aspects of diasporic experience. In this café, bonds of community are forged between the different workers and customers of different ethnicities (23). Moreover, the Arabic café amidst the Irani sector of L.A. represents one more example of the cultural mixtures and

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[36] An example of Hollywood renditions of *The Nights* is Walter Wanger's 1942 film *Arabian Nights* which grossed several million dollars during World War Two. Walter Wanger and Universal Pictures, the producers of *Arabian Nights,* discovered that in the midwar years, at least, this type of film appealed to American homefront audiences. Wanger felt these films attracted adolescent men, whom he thought might be inspired to enlist for service in North Africa through these movies. In this movie, Shahrazad is no longer the Vizier's daughter who risks her life to save the women of her city, but a power-hungry dancing girl played by Maria Montez. The empowering role of storytelling is removed from Shahrazad and the other women portrayed in the movie.

amalgamations of the different places found in cities like Los Angeles, where stores are reminiscent of Cairo and Mexico and Korean candies are sold as well as Chinese medicinal herbs and Japanese ointments (208). In this manner, Abu-Jaber troubles any notion of fixity with regards to identity, as diasporic communities like "Tehrangeles" multiply. New diaspora discourse challenges the idea that diasporas are directed to a singular fixed reality or imagined homeland, suggesting that there can be "dual centrality" (Werbner 15). In my opinion though, such dual centrality is impossible in a globalized world where it would perhaps be more correct to use the oxymoron "multi-centrality." In Abu-Jaber's novel, both Baghdad and Los Angeles are "sacred centers" along with the many other places and countries that come to inhabit Los Angeles. The intra-culturalization in Los Angeles then is an example of how, "[t]he performative intervenes in the sovereignty of the nation's *self-generation* by casting a shadow between the people as 'image' and its signification as a differentiating sign of Self" (Bhabha, *The Location* 211-212). This is why diasporic identities include continual performances of memories of cross-border affiliations, which surpass national boundaries. These performances of memories constantly shape how diasporas interact with their new surroundings. Such performances of memory are embodied in the very name "Tehrangeles" where the people perform Tehran, Turkey, Kuwait, and Egypt in the heart of Los Angeles, challenging attempts to claim a fixed spatial sovereignty and foregrounding the inchoate nature of nationalisms, particularly in a globalized context.

The Sheherazadian narrative, as a diasporic narrative, extends the boundaries of affiliation beyond an "a priori" fixed nation-state, highlighting that nation is a continuous act of narration. As a narrative of diasporic cultural memory, Sheherazadian narrative

questions issues of home and identity, intervening in the autonomy of nation creation. This is why interpretations of national identities, forged through constant oscillation between the pedagogical and performative, are replacing interpretations of nation as a "differentiating sign of Self" (Bhabha, *The Location* 212). Stress is placed on shuttling movements and the partial truths of narrative. Accordingly, when Sirine questions her uncle about the truth of his stories, he evasively answers, "Look at it this way: there is truth inside everything living and dying and more, you just can't always recognize it" (308). This "partiality" created within Sheherazadian narrative and also through its interruption of the main narrative represents an integral aspect of living the Arab-American diaspora.

Challenging Racial Purity: Miscegenation and Mermaid Alieph

The mermaid Alieph, whose name refers to the first letter of the Arabic alphabet, is one of the characters who challenge the fixity of racial categorizations in *Crescent's* Sheherazadian narrative; she incarnates "partiality." Though she initially helps Camille in her search for her lost son Salahadin, she does not perform the typical role of the mermaid who generally performs favours for human beings. In fact, she seems to revolt against this prescribed role: "All day long people are coming to ask me favors! Do this, do that. Does anyone care what it's like for me?" (271). Alieph prefers writing to the typical job of wrecking ships and decides to isolate herself in the land of Na to write (279). It is this mermaid poet who is able to reunite Camille and her son in the end, after managing to move more freely on her motorized wheelchair! It is interesting to note here that Camille is referred to in relation to Sheherazade, "Camille had been the one to show Burton who

Shahrazad might have been" (137). Moreover, as a mermaid who is half fish and half human, Alieph represents the hybrid position which places her in exile from both species. One cannot help but interpret her experience of hybridity to be a comment upon the slippage of boundaries which diasporic identities undergo. Interestingly enough, Alieph the mermaid is joined by the twenty-seven other mermaids, all named after the remaining letters of the Arabic alphabet. Through such a move, Abu-Jaber literally makes the Arabic language, in the diaspora, a tool of miscegenation. In the diasporic context, the Arabic language becomes a tool of hybridity as individuals negotiate linguistic boundaries, recreating Arabic. Through this character, Abu-Jaber undermines the formal role of the mermaid in *The Nights* as a silent creature that lures sailors. In *Crescent's* version, the mermaid is overtly expressive and revolts against accepted interpretations of her role. Her experience of miscegenation becomes the plight of the Arab-American diasporic community. Accordingly, the mermaid's translation into this text is shaped by the diasporic experiences of Arab-American women in particular.

The experience of "living the *locality* of culture" is exemplified through the reinterpretation of characters like Alif whose change in character expresses how historical certainty has been replaced by ways of living the "locality" of culture. As a female, Alif's hybrid experience may be interpreted as an attempt to unfix Arab-American women's stereotypical representations in mainstream American media. Her tale becomes one of "slippage" of categories, which challenges the fixed representations of the other. According to Bhabha, national subjects are continuously re-inventing the nation since it is not a "historical certainty" but "an obscure and ubiquitous form of living the *locality* of culture" which produces "slippage of categories" so that racial affiliations and cultural

differences cannot be conceived in hierarchical terms (*Location* 200-201). It hence becomes impossible to consider diasporic affiliations and hyphenated identities in hierarchical contexts.

Diasporic experience should rather be interpreted as a result of the constant "slippage" between affiliations. Accordingly, the Sheherazadian narrative as a diasporic narrative interrupts monolithic representations of the Arab woman, opening up this constructed category. Sirine's uncle draws attention to the complexity of the Sheherazadian narrative which constantly weaves complex patterns of identities requiring "greater care and general alertness than your run-of-the-mill everyday story with a moral, which basically gives you the Cliffs Notes version of itself in the end anyway" (88). The subject of *Crescent* becomes dispersion since hegemonies, whether national or pertaining to glorified ethnocentric cultural memories, are challenged. Members of the diaspora can become particularly active in the process of national reinvention because of their multiple affiliations; they play an active role in creating new communities that surpass affiliations of kin and at the same time hail the sources of communal empowerment within them. Sirine's group of friends at the restaurant are an example of such a community. Moreover, Sirine herself is very much a product of such communal affiliations since she is not raised by her mother or her father, but rather by her uncle. Such constructed relations played out on the level of family complicate "a priori" conceptions of the nuclear family and nation. Diasporic affiliations that extend beyond fixed identities complicate "a priori" essentialist conceptions of nation, overturning the foundations of Orientalism. The Sheherazadian narrative's incorporation of Richard Burton, one of the well-known 19th century

translators of *The Nights*, represents a resistant move on behalf of Abu-Jaber, as she seeks to counter his translation's Orientalist leanings.

Resisting Orientalism through Sheherazadian Narrative

The Sheherazadian narrative introduces us to a variety of culture-traversing characters that are constantly negotiating their identities, drawing attention to how diasporic space is one of recasting and redefinition. Throughout the Sheherazadian narrative both Abdelrahman Salahadin and Camille his mother constantly experience the divided sense of affiliation which usually characterizes those living in diaspora. Abdelrahman Salahadin is described in these terms: "In his left ear was the soft inhalation and exhalation of the desert and the susurration of the ocean winds. In his right ear was the sharp metallic din of America" (366). In these words, Hanif hints at a visceral connection with a memory of home that embodies the strength of affiliations despite the crossing of geographical boundaries. The main protagonist of the Sheherazadian narrative, Salahadin, experiences this crossing of borders through his various journeys that displace him constantly. This narrative becomes the means through which an Arab-American diasporic narrative is made to comment upon the first Gulf War in Iraq and how Arab-Americans negotiate for themselves a position within such intersections. This highlights how mainstream American media representations of Arabs have served to make "Arab" a derogatory term.[37]

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[37] It is interesting to consider the current negative connotations of the term Arab especially within the context of the 2008 presidential elections. During the Republican Party's rallies one participant condemned the then democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama as an Arab. As a

Abu-Jaber links her writing with the narrative tradition of Sheherazade, which as an oral narrative had the distinguishing characteristic of being infinitely fertile and fluctuating. In this manner, though Abu-Jaber seeks to re-establish a connection with foremother storytelling figures like Sheherazade, she does not allow that *The Nights* to be framed in an essentialized manner. She reinterprets the Sheherazade / Shahriyar scenario as well as the roles of stock characters of *The Nights* such as adventurers, jinns, and mermaids. Storytelling, in this sense, performs the role of reshaping and reviving aspects of Arab-American lives. This creative aspect of the Sheherazadian narrative is filtered through to readers in Sirine's relationship to cooking. By introducing Sirine to the malleability of storytelling, Abu-Jaber engages her in the act of "speaking-listening-weaving-procreating" (Minh-ha 124). Sirine's creative food concoctions, as shaped through culinary experimentation with the spices and seasonings of different cultures and her interests in Medieval Arab cooking, express her literal attempt to disperse and complicate conceptions of monolithic identity and draw attention to the composite experiences of Arab-Americans in the present U.S. As a result of this hybrid experience, *The Nights* is rewritten within an Arab-American context.

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woman claims that she does not trust Obama and that he is an Arab, McCain reassures her that he is not; he points out that he is a decent family man, as if the term Arab negates that in some way. What is worthy of analysis in this context is how the term has come to connote a monolithic negative representation, that I would argue has its origins in both political representations of Arabs in media and Hollywood films. (See "Woman Calls Obama an Arab").

Reinventing *The Nights*: Sheherazade Speaks Arab-American

Through Sirine's experience of her Iraqi-American identity, within the historical context of the first war in Iraq, one can trace the tensions involved in Homi Bhabha's analysis of the indeterminate nature of the concept of nation. One is able to "explore the Janus-faced ambivalence of language itself in the construction of the Janus-faced discourse of nation [which] investigates the nation-space in the *process* of articulation of elements: where meanings may be partial because they are *in medias res;* and history may be half-made because it is in the process of being made" (*Nation* 3). This "Janus-faced" characteristic of affiliation is hinted at by Sirine when she discovers the problematics of her Iraqi-American identity as she attempts to travel to Baghdad during the war. She is informed that there is a travel ban for Americans and hence is forced to consider for the first time claiming the other facet of her identity: "What if I was Iraqi?" (339). Within such a context, any metaphor of the nation is bound to be contested because it is the project of constant negotiation between those who are (or are not) admitted to it. As the narrative lines of Sirine's life and those of Sheherazadian narrative converge and diverge, the reader can trace the workings of the pedagogical and performative processes involved in an understanding of a transnationalism through which nation becomes a constant form of narration.

Correspondingly, this narrative structurally enacts - through its interruptive processes - how the performative constantly drives an understanding of nation as narration. As we follow these lines of the two narratives, we are confronted with an experience of what Bhabha refers to as "the nation split within itself," which functions through the heterogeneity of a population challenging hegemonic tendencies (*Location*

212). In this sense, the Sheherazadian diasporic narrative traces this "splitting." Moreover, the very performativity of the narrative calls attention to the vital role of constant examination and self critique in developing conceptions of nation. Along these lines, one can perceive the diaspora, as it is represented in *Crescent,* as a space of contestations which provides occasion for contingency, but never complete resolution. Upon considering the narrative's relation to national affiliations, Sirine's uncle informs her that listening to a story requires a suspension of resolution: "My dear, apparently you have to let the story come to you, you cannot fling yourself upon it" (137). Diasporic narrative, as a negotiational space, becomes an interesting site of cultural translation, since it allows different narrative threads to touch but never be completely woven. The manner through which these narratives co-exist mimic-performs the workings of narrating the nation which is related to problems of transitional history, conceptual indeterminacy, and wavering between vocabularies (*Nation* 4). This wavering between vocabularies with the aim of redefinition is a characteristic of diaspora writing.

Going After Burton: How Does the Sheherazadian Narrative Resist?

The Sheherazadian narrative in *Crescent* is a self-aware narrative that often parodies the original *Nights* narrative, poking fun at its fantastic nature through reinvention of the typical roles of characters such as the jinns and fair maidens. For example, Aunt Camille, Salahadin's mother, becomes Richard Burton's slave and instead of being ruled by him, rules him so that "All the household waited on her-the servants, the foreign scholars and students, the English explorers, and even Burton himself" (136). Burton, the English nineteenth-century translator of *The Nights* is hence interpellated

within a modern version of his tales. In Camille's manipulation of Burton, we can trace a deliberate change in the role of the servant as typically portrayed in *The Nights*.

Sheherazadian narrative is most diasporic when it is not a word for word rendition of the narrative style of the original collection of tales, inviting within its boundaries culture-traversing figures like Burton. In *Crescent*, Abu-Jaber uses Burton's translational attempts of othering to other him. Abu-Jaber describes Burton's unsuccessful attempts at translation saying, "[h]e dressed in native garb, spent hours gazing into Arab eyes. Arabic, in turn, went into his heart like a piercing seed, growing tendrils of beliefs and attitudes. But his tongue was flat as slate. He spoke so many languages that he had no native music left in him" (121). In a sense, *Crescent's* tales are told in a manner to reverse the exotic representations in Burton's copious notes to his translation of *The Nights*. As a translation, Burton's *Nights* is shaped by his imperialistic tendencies as one of the officials of the British Empire, as well as his own interests in Eastern sexology. These interests shaped his translation despite the original entertainment role of this collection in its source culture. In this sense, Burton's *Nights* is first and foremost about Burton: "Above all it was a perfect vehicle for his secretive soul. He could tell a tale about himself, and call it ancient folklore. He could hide all his prejudices all his secret innuendoes behind a cataract of footnotes, all on the surface purporting to illuminate the fictional text" (Hastings 251). This is why *The Nights* served and continues to serve in freezing Arab peoples within an eternal eroticized and "othered" context.

Abu-Jaber, upon introducing Sir Richard Burton in her Sheherazadian narrative, describes him as "an amateur, [who] enjoyed collecting people just for the sake of collecting. He adorned himself with Arabs, Chinese, and Indians, and he wrote and wrote and wrote,

trying to fill the empty space inside him with a layer of ink" (122). Consequently, his translations represent a questionable attempt at cultural translation. Arguably, all of Burton's observations were governed by the imperial enterprise. His views of Eastern women, which played an important role in the way he shaped descriptions of women in *The Nights* were according to Kaabani "patterned on the master-slave relationship [...] The woman was chattel and sexual convenience [...] Burton always retained his age's polarised view of women. They were either sexual beings who were whorish, or caring companions in the home" (*Europe's Myths* Kaabani 48). Burton's notes to *The Nights* are structured in a manner that placed him in the position of authoritative commentator upon Eastern sexuality. Such a response to Eastern peoples, which reduces the many aspects of their lives to sexual practices and the East to a sexual domain, is a perception consistent with imperialism, since colonization and recurrent images of sexual penetration are foils to one another. Eastern women are reduced to objects of desire in this sense because within a Victorian context "[w]hat the narrator felt himself unable to say about European women, he could unabashedly say about Eastern ones. They were there for his articulation of sex" (Kabbani 59). Such sexualization may be referred to in terms of fetishistic disavowal through which as Stuart Hall argues, "a powerful fascination or desire is both indulged and at the same time denied" (267). Accordingly, the Eastern woman becomes the vehicle of indulgence.

To hide this, Burton constructed his descriptions of the East in his notes to *The Nights* in accordance to the register of the newly emerging science of anthropology, claiming a scientific truthfulness and hence projecting upon his translation project the air of authenticity. However, nineteenth-century anthropology was mostly shaped by a

hierarchical classification of race and was a main tool of empire. The basis of this science was that the "Other" is an object to be studied, analyzed, and recorded. It exaggerated this "Othering" in a manner that aimed at reducing Easterners and especially women, in Burton's case, to objects of sexual pleasure. Kabbani underlines Burton's reductive attitude when she points out that "'Eastern wisdom, then, consisted for Burton of sexual wisdom" (65). Ella Shohat discusses the significance of such imperial translations arguing that "imperial narratives are organized around metaphors of rape, fantasies of rescue, and eroticized geographies" (*Taboo Memories* 61). In a sense, then, Burton's very choice to translate *The Nights* and his extensive additional notes on the text are predetermined by his own personal views of the East and Eastern women. These personal views shape a large portion of his commentaries since "[i]n the volumes of his *Nights,* one is aware of two voices. [...] In the first instance, translation and commentary are combined in a running analysis of the ancient tales [...] In the second instance, besides the footnotes, there appears from time to time a number of insertions (euphemisms, callow gags, heteronyms etc), which bear his most personal signature" (Hastings 265).

An understanding of *The Nights'* Sheherazadian narrative as a diasporic narrative does not hence merely mean knowledge of its narrative processes, but also requires an understanding of *how* and *why* those narrative processes were originally translated into English. The aim behind such an understanding is to reveal the resistance to modes of Orientalism and "race thinking" involved in writing an Arab-American narrative. As a result of this, the significance of introducing Sir Richard Burton in *Crescent's* Sheherazadian narrative becomes evident. Abu-Jaber's satirical portrayal of this character and her choice to frame him within the tales that he claimed were the essence of Arab

character and life is an example of Abu-Jaber's resistant rewriting and her attempt to free the *Nights'* text of ethnographic restrictions. Burton's introduction into the Sheherazadian narrative is an expression of such redeployment of *The Nights* with the aim of redefinition. Such redefinition takes place with the aim of forging a "dihlizian" experience of diasporic being in writing.

Diaspora and inhabiting the "*dihliz*" in Writing

In a way, *Crescent* then becomes Abu-Jaber's attempt at creating a "dihliz" in her writing. Analogously, Abu-Jaber and the other Arab-American women writers and performers in this study can be interpreted as weaving the threads of their identities to a malleable understanding of American nation, using translational figures like Sheherazade or her "Sheherazadian" storytelling techniques to embody "dispersed" experiences of belonging. Hanif describes the diasporic experience of homelessness which diasporic individuals inhabit:

> It's a dim, gray room, full of sounds and shadows, but there's nothing real or actual inside it [...] Sometimes when I see some of those homeless people on the street [...] I think I've never felt so close to anyone [...] They know what it feels like- they live in between worlds so they're not really anywhere. (183)

These words encapsulate a rather nostalgic perception of the "in between worlds" experience of diaspora. The words Han uses seem to recall the structure of the *dihliz* as a "dim," "gray," "full of sounds and shadows," and "in between worlds." For Sirine, this *dihlizian* space takes on completely different aspects as it is a space of cultural

negotiation and transformational creation. While Han settles for the nostalgic aspects of this experience, Sirine is materially involved in remaking, resisting and recooking her diasporic experience in her culinary *dihlizian* space. By considering the complications of Arab-American diasporic existences, within the context of current U.S. foreign relations, Abu-Jaber's *Crescent* directly resists mainstream American media images of oppressed silent Arab women by reviving the subversive folkloric Sheherazadian narrative/spectrum. If Shahriyar represents conservative hegemonic tendencies to reduce nation into a singular ray of light, Sirine's material culinary experiences and cultural productions become the prism and medium through which such hegemonies are dispersed and questioned.

Newspapers, Media, and Diasporic Communities

In Sirine's attempts at cultural translation, she does not resort to cultural essentialization. Rather she constantly stresses the fluctuating, "dispersal" of identities and nations. Sirine describes how diasporic communities forge relations with their original homes through news when she refers to Arab students inhabiting actual and virtual homescapes: "News from Algeria, Bethlehem, Baghdad. Sometimes she's seen them in the campus library, studying Internet news on the terminals. She knows that the news is at the center of their lives" (196). In this way, newspapers and media form the basis for an Arab-American diasporic consciousness as Benedict Anderson argues in *Imagined Communities* (44). The newspapers and T.V. channels these students watch are often Arabic, hence often representing a different perspective than mainstream American newspapers and media. Accordingly, diasporic communities form their consciousness as a

result of intersecting perspectives in the media, not as a result of reading or viewing one perspective. Arab-American diasporic experience is revealed as dispersed and malleable. It becomes more relevant then to talk of national consciousness since Arab-Americans can inhabit more than one imagined community, which shape their intersectional perspectives. Such a move on Abu-Jaber's behalf, to complicate notions of identity and existence is key to an understanding of Abu-Jaber's position within the field of Arab-American literature. Steven Salaita discusses the significance of such a move, referring to it as the emergence of the theme "of doubleness of signification, which highlights the spaces between Arab and American, and impels the author toward a strategy of negotiation" ("Sandniggers" 425). *Crescent* seeks to translate Arab-American cultural experiences, drawing attention to the negotiational dispersive processes involved in diasporic writing.

Who is Translating and Why?

Accordingly, Abu-Jaber's act of translation in *Crescent* is her attempt at questioning past and current imperialistic and "race thinking" processes governing cultural and actual translation. Such translations play an important role in shaping the diasporic politics of nations to this day. This is because such translations play a role in creating an aggregation of representations which shape what Stuart Hall refers to as "the spectacle of the Other" ("The Spectacle" 225). According to Hall, images and representations of the "Other" can be used to connote essentialist, reductionist, naturalized, and binary oppositions about race. Moreover, stereotyping as a representational practice is related to the play of power, as well as the unconscious effects

of fantasy, fetishism and disavowal. ("The Spectacle" 50). In *Crescent*'s Sheherazadian narrative, Jinns and beautiful maidens defy their prescribed roles and mother-figures like Camille set out to save heroes like Abdelrahman Salahadin. Abu-Jaber's "*bricolage*" of *The Nights* and its characters reminds her readers that these tales are not ethnography, as Burton sought to frame them. This move on her behalf challenges the boundaries of set pedagogical conceptions of belonging in relation to a diasporic narrative, inviting a more malleable interpretation of them. Such a challenge to the circulation of stock stereotypes is what governs the process of "Othering" at work in the mass-mediated spectacles of the Other, which are caught up in social and political power structures. According to Hall, essentialism, reductionism, naturalization, and the creation of binary oppositions are the more conscious strategies of "Othering," while the more subtle, subconscious ones crystallize in fantasy, fetishism, and disavowal. Hall argues, "[s]tereotyped" means "reduced to a few essentials, fixed in Nature by a few, simplified characteristics" ("The Spectacle" 49). Those few outstanding traits are then declared part of the Other's unchanging natural essence.

Crescent hence becomes Abu-Jaber's resistance to such fixation. Cultural translation can become a tool of resistance in writings of the diaspora and is one of the characteristic qualities of the Sheherazadian narrative and the main narrative in *Crescent*. By translating alternative experiences and alternative characters, the Sheherazadian narrative challenges hegemonic tendencies. Within our contemporary globalized context, diasporic narratives have a pivotal role in the translation process. Consequently, processes of globalization infiltrate our lives at many different levels and translation of "ideas" may be perceived as one of the major transactions involved in globalization. Due to this

integral relationship between translation of "ideas" and globalization: "translation histories are no longer confined to the internal experiences of the territorially bounded nation-state but include the manifold translation activities of a country's diaspora" (Cronin 78). Hence, the translational histories involved in Abu-Jaber's writing reverberate beyond the boundaries of so-called American, Arab, or Iraqi identity- shaping. Due to present consequences of globalization, visions of the nation-state are slowly being replaced by what is referred to as the deterritorialized nation. I find the suggestion of nations migrating along with emigrants convincing. Homeland tales and narratives do cross borders along with immigrants, but this does not necessarily suggest that these tales do not change. Members of the diaspora as they redefine their position within their new home, through processes of narration, also imaginatively reposition their old homes.

Crescent's Cultural Translation

Timothy Weiss justifies the need for cultural translation, arguing that "[u]nderstanding subjects and cultures requires translation because neither subjects nor cultures exist intrinsically as autonomous or independent entities; they exist interdependently, in relation" (11). Such an understanding of the need for exploring how and why cultural translations are formed becomes particularly important in understanding Arab-American diasporic texts because these processes of translation shape the everyday interactions of particular diasporic communities. As characters like Hanif live their everyday lives in the diaspora, traces of past lives continue to shape their experiences. At the same time, traces of the target culture are also present, so that the attempt at

translation becomes a constant active process of oscillation. Structurally, the constant oscillation between narratives in *Crescent* enacts these processes of cultural translation.

Abu-Jaber, through Sheherazadian narrative and her attempts at formulating an Arab-American diasporic narrative in *Crescent,* draws attention to the contentious position of the diasporic individual. Diasporic individuals exist in contested zones whose cross-boundary affiliations are not accurately depicted in interpretations of nation that exclude gender and otherness from their context like Benedict Anderson's conception of imagined communities. Anderson's imagined community presents a monolithic formation that fails to take into consideration positionalities. Exclusionary tactics shape conceptions of citizenship and national consciousness as an imagined community: "[l]iving in a nation does not, by definition, provide one with the prerogative to imagine it [...] Such privilege, manifested as a belonging and conforming to regulatory norms and forms has been restricted [...] Being working class, being "raced," and being of a certain gender all restrict access to citizenship" (Bannerji 66-67). Citizenship and national belonging are two distinct concepts; however, they are linked in the sense that citizenship laws can affect experiences of national belonging. Diasporic identities disperse simplistic understandings of nation and represent a challenge to current understandings of citizenship. The nation must hence continue its performative role in order to be able to better accommodate the diasporic affiliations of all citizens, encouraging them to perform their roles of citizenship. Through her invocation and remaking of the Sheherazadian narrative, Abu-Jaber introduces the struggles involved in Arab-American diasporic experience without simplistically glorifying any one aspect of Arab-American identities.

In this sense, she revives the subversive resistant aspect of Sheherazade's powerful storytelling, through which she was able to convince the king to listen to her tales for a thousand and one nights. Consequently, this empowering woman's narrative becomes the tool for reinscribing an active, fertile understanding of nation which opens space for an understanding of citizenship that respects the affiliations of Arab-American citizens on its soil. Such an attempt at tracing the outlines of Arab-American identity through exploring the artistic productions of Arab-American women writers, within the current political moment, opens up the venue for using diaspora, as a productive means for analyzing varied affiliations, within the context of resurging Orientalism and the institutionalization of racism. An example of a study which examined the nature of the systemic racism taking place against Arab-Americans post-9/11 is Leti Volpp's "The Citizen and the Terrorist." In it he suggests that September 11 facilitated the consolidation of a new identity category that groups together persons who appear Middle Eastern, Arab, or Muslim. This consolidation reflects a racialization wherein members of this group are identified as terrorists, and are disidentified as citizens.

Chapter 3

"Fabricating" Affiliation: Fashioning Scarves in Muslim-American Women's Diasporic Experiences

No, I'm not bald under the scarf / No, I'm not from that country where women can't drive cars / No, I would not like to defect / I'm already American

--Mohja Kahf, "*Hijab* Scene #7"

The above lines of Mohja Kahf's poem deal with some of the prevalent stereotypes related to the veil/*hijab*/headscarf in the Arab-American context.[38] The cultural and economic ramifications of such stereotypical suppositions in the diaspora were recently discussed in a newspaper article from the *National Post* entitled "Hijab on the Job." In this article, Sarah Treleaven discusses how the headscarf is perceived in the workplace, considering some of the false assumptions which many women who choose to wear it experience. Treleaven states that a study funded by the Canadian Heritage-Multiculturalism Program and Status of Women Canada found that more than 40% of women who wear the headscarf upon applying for work were told that they must take off the *hijab* if they wanted the job.[39] Within this article, the paradoxical workings of Western liberal discourse and its adverse economic ramifications upon actual women who choose to wear the headscarf become all too evident. Such an interpretation of the

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[38] Throughout this chapter I prefer to use the term headscarf in an attempt to counter the Orientalist discursive practices which are signified by the words veil and *hijab.* In some instances I use the multiple terms *hijab*/veil/headscarf to point out these very discursive practices and what they signify.

[39] Sarah Treleaven, "Hijab on the Job," *National Post,* 5 July, 2008: 3.

veil/*hijab*/headscarf designates it as an impediment to national belonging, since the employers mentioned above perceive it as a form of dress outside the boundaries of the norm for their institutions or companies. They are hence inherently denying these women their civil rights, since they are not employing them because of cultural and religious aspects of their appearance rather than their qualifications. This is because the veil/*hijab*/headscarf in North America and in Europe is an item of dress that concurrently stabilizes and destabilizes identity, as will be discussed in detail later on in this chapter. In relation to the above what I aim to explore in this chapter is how Mohja Kahf, the Syrian-American diasporic writer, weaves her discussion of the headscarf into her adaptation of "Sheherazadian narrative" refashioning in the process conceptions of national belonging.[40]

Kahf foregrounds the diversity of Muslim-American women and their experiences of wearing the headscarf through recasting Sheherazadian narrative; in this she resists reductive perceptions of Muslim women and their identities. Cultural mythic figures like Sheherazade usually serve to unite a particular culture and serve to express a unified system of beliefs. However, Kahf's reintroduction of Sheherazade in her poems functions to refract attempts at freezing Sheherazade within prevalent Orientalist and racist frameworks that date back to the nineteenth-century translations of *The Nights*. She

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[40] Mohja Kahf was born in Damascus, Syria and before turning four moved with her family to the United States in 1971. She has written poetry, essays, literary criticism, short stories and a novel. The reception of her work has been mostly positive and her *E-mails from Scheherazad* (2003) was a finalist for the Paterson Literary Award in 2004. She currently teaches in the English and Comparative Literature Departments at the University of Arkansas.

resurrects Sheherazade as a writer, a lover, and a revolutionary *odalisque* in her collection of poems. She revives Orientalist perceptions of Muslim women's identities through this figure, only to disperse and fracture them. In this dispersion of the Sheherazade figure, she enacts the constant workings of memory within a diasporic context, which seeks and always fails to grasp the ungraspable past. Such an attempt to forge a collective memory rooted in the ever transformative production of Sheherazadian narrative works to develop interpretations of an active and constantly transformational group identity.

Such an approach to Muslim-American women's negotiations of their identities opens analysis of the headscarf in relation to a multitude of social and economic experiences, which surmount attempts at reducing the act of choosing to wear a headscarf to oppression and the limitation of women's rights. It is important to note here that scholars like Leila Ahmed have argued that the relation between the veil and women's rights can best be described as forced. Ahmed points out, "the veil itself and whether it is worn are 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" (*Women* 166). She also calls attention to the discrepancies of the emancipatory rhetoric often ascribed to unveiling which is shaped by "a vague and inaccurate understanding of Muslim societies" (Ahmed, *Women* 166).

In the previous chapter, I defined diasporic narrative as a narrative which forges a collective cultural memory through the reinvention of cultural symbols, with the aim of resisting racism and Orientalism. Accordingly, the Sheherazadian narrative in Kahf's collection of poetry *E-Mails from Scheherazad* (2003) partially works to reinvent the lived experience of wearing the headscarf in relation to Muslim women's diasporic

experiences. This is through the "Hijab Scene" poems which engage the reader in the lived experience of wearing the headscarf in the Arab-American diaspora. By collecting these poems along with others under the title *E-Mails from Scheherazad* Kahf questions ethnocentric biased stances of either strictly Muslim or American identities, dispersing monolithic fetishized representations of Sheherazade as the mythic "Muslim woman" so popular in the media. The scantily clad dancing Sheherazade of Hollywood film is reincarnated in Kahf's poetry in a myriad of shapes, undermining the tendency to freeze her into a stereotype.

If the Sheherazadian narrative in Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent* occupies a central role in exploring Arab-American diasporic narrative structures, Sheherazade as narrator in Kahf's *E-mails from Scheherazad,* adamantly resists dominant media representations of the "Muslim Woman," through an active engagement with global fashion practices. She shows an awareness of the racing of her Muslim identity position and resists both the exotic and oppressed stereotypes ascribed to Muslim women. This is why Sheherazade can be understood in terms of what some critics refer to as a "composite figure," who is "the kind of figure that is formed by means of efforts - in diasporic outposts - to cobble or piece together cultural elements or 'bits' that previously belonged to separate, distinct cultural artefacts or practices" (Bardenstein 30). One can argue that though Sheherazade has always been a figure of resistance in Arab feminist writing, as is clear in the literary output of Arab women writers like Nawal El-Saadawi, Assia Djebar, and Fatema Mernessi, she undergoes further transformation in the diaspora.

As a "composite" cultural production of the diaspora, she brings together a variety of seemingly contradictory representations. Kahf, through her reintroduction of

Sheherazade, deconstructs the stereotypes of both the passive and silent Muslim woman and the "Oriental" dancer as she reintroduces Sheherazade as a writer, an Arab-American woman negotiating her life in the diaspora, and a revolutionary odalisque. In this sense, Sheherazade becomes a figure of *bricolage* in Kahf's hands since she resists the constrained translations of Arab women's experience through a rather exotic character, opening up such representations to new meanings of plurality. Although not all the poems directly reintroduce Sheherazade as a narrator, the fact that the whole collection is entitled *E-mails from Scheherazad* suggests that Arab and Muslim-American women's experiences described in the poems are a summation of a "composite," diasporic narrative. In Kahf's poems, Sheherazade assumes a Muslim identity, though in a variety of molds. Sheherazade's name is mentioned overtly only twice in this collection of poetry when the frame narrative of *The Thousand and One Nights* is introduced in the poems "E-mail from Scheherazad" and "So You Think You Know Scheherazad." However, Sheherazade's voice permeates the remaining poems in the collection, so that we can always trace her within the lines of the different poems whether they discuss odalisques, representations of Muslim women, or diasporic experiences. Kahf encourages such an interpretation by entitling her whole collection *E-Mails from Scheherazad.* Her use of the term e-mail to describe her poems is interesting since it is a technological, indirect, quick, and pervasive form of communication. These e-mails/poems can hence be considered the communication space where she expresses her message regarding Muslim women and their representations. Moreover, this mode brings Sheherazade into the twenty-first century, as she now creates concise narratives which can travel all over our globalized web-connected world.

E-Mails and "Splintered" Belonging

The metaphor of nation as an active process of narration as described by Homi Bhabha interweaves with the evolving Sheherazadian diasporic Arab and Muslim American women's narrative in Kahf's poems. The translation of Sheherazade within the Muslim, Arab-American and particularly Syrian-American diaspora, can be perceived as an example of how literary characters and traditions when translated into new cultures function through paradox. It is important to point out here that I am aware of the multiple identities that come under the term Arab and Muslim diaspora. Kahf herself belongs to the Syrian-American diaspora which has a specific historical and political relationship to the U.S. Syria was a French colony for twenty years which in 1970 came under the rule of the secular socialist Baath party. As a modern state, it has undergone a confluence of political turmoil and the threat of war with Israel, which damaged the country's social and economic institutions. All of this lead to a series of waves of Syrian emigration. In the 1990s, the relations between Syria and the U.S. became extremely strained because of its support of groups like Hezbollah. In May 2004, President George W. Bush implemented sanctions against Syria and has used them since then as a means of pressure on Syria (*Britannica Encyclopedia Online,* "Syria").

Brent Hayes Edwards argues that a characteristic of diaspora literature is the tendency to belong and at the same time express difference. Hayes Edwards cites Stuart Hall's notion of articulation as a useful concept in understanding the contradictory workings of diaspora literature and further develops it pointing out, "articulation is central to the study of workings of race and culture in social formations because the image of the joint expresses ambivalence, the joint is a curious place, as it is both the point of

separation [...] and the point of linkage [...] Articulation is always a strange and ambivalent gesture, because finally, in the body it is *only* difference-the separation between bones or members-that allows movement" (15). This is the attitude towards cultural translation which Kahf seems to play with in her poems as she weaves English and Arabic words in a hybrid format in poems like "Fayetteville as in Fate," where she contemplates what unites and divides people in Damascus and people in Fayetteville, a small town in Arkansas: "Whole populations of seed sowers and herb knowers / some from Damascus, some from Fayetteville, they meet" (26-27, 6). Through paralleling the people and landscapes of these places that either pick *"khibbeze"* or "poke," wear "overalls" or a *"sirwal,"* and knead the same bread though shaping it differently, she describes "the joint" that is her diasporic experience which both links and separates.

Through this weaving of images and languages, she translates the experience of Sheherazade in the diaspora in a discursive heterogeneity, which works to defamiliarize the experience of reading these English poems to its readers. She invites them into the linguistically and culturally heterogeneous world of a Syrian-American woman, living in the diaspora with her cultural "articulations." In this manner, she inscribes the language of her poems with the multiple cultural and linguistic landscapes she inhabits, never completely succeeding in rewriting English into Arabic, as she seeks in one of the other poems in the collection "Copulation in English." This raises the pressing question which imposes itself in discussions of translation theory related to a cultural studies analysis: how can translation claim a cross-cultural understanding when translation itself is rooted in inscription rather than communication? Lawrence Venuti deals with this problem by

suggesting that any attempts at translation, despite the remainders of the target language they inscribe present the potential for achieving a "communicative function":

> The autonomy of the translated text is redefined as the target-language 'remainder' that the translator releases in the hope of bridging the linguistic and cultural boundaries among readerships. Translating always encounters incommensurabilities, different ways of comprehending and evaluating the translated text and indeed the world. But these encounters do not so much negate the communicative function of translation as splinter it into potentialities that can only be realized in reception. (335)

Such incommensurabilities create the "splintered potentialities" that represent the various "joints" that allow the paradoxical movements of diasporic literature to simultaneously belong and express difference. These are the "articulation" movements that Kahf creates in her poetry.

In her snap-shot-like poems and through her poetic Sheherazadian narrative, Kahf disperses Sheherazade into Sheherazades who question the image problem which Muslim-American women face. Attempts at formulating collective identities in the diaspora are introduced and analyzed from a feminist perspective in the poem "My Body Is Not Your Battleground." In this poem, Kahf expresses feminist disdain at attempts of claiming the bodies of Muslim women by competing groups seeking to interpret the headscarf according to their different political ideologies. This is a reference to colonized Arab and Muslim countries, whose anti-colonial movements latched upon the veil as a nationalist symbol. An example of this is how the anti-colonial movement in Algeria utilized the veil. On the opposite side, colonial powers claiming the goal of enlightening

and modernizing the countries they colonize by improving the status of women stress that unveiling is the first step to modernization. Colonial discourses on veiling in Egypt and Algeria are examples of this. In the Arab-American diasporic context, these discourses form a cloud of meanings and interpretations that shape how the headscarf is to this day interpreted. This is why Kahf claims wearing the headscarf as an active personal choice and revolts against interpretations of her body and choosing to cover their heads in terms of woman / nation "My hair will not bring progress and clean water / if it flies unbraided in the breeze / It will not save us from our attackers / if it is wrapped and shielded from the sun / Untangle your hands from my hair" (14-18, 58).

Before going into the details of Kahf's poetic and cultural negotiations, I would first like to discuss the possible confusion that may arise from my use of the term Muslim-American and Syrian-American woman. I use these terms interchangeably because Kahf articulates her diasporic narrative at the intersection of these positioned identifications. My analysis concentrates upon resistance to prevalent racing attempts in colonial Orientalism and newer modes of American Orientalism, which do not differentiate the various positioned identifications within Arab-American communities. I will hence use these terms as they are pertinent to the textual and contextual framework I am working within. Paul Gilroy points to the possible crippling effects of fixed identity. He warns that when identity does not involve a continuous process of reinterpretation and social interaction it becomes "a silent sign that closes down the possibility of communication across the gulf between one heavily defended island of particularity and its equally well fortified neighbors" (103). Within this camp mentality context, the other can only be a threat. However, what is unique about Kahf's approach in analyzing

Muslim-American women's identities is her endeavour to deconstruct attempts at reducing the diversity and richness of their personal experiences - wearing the headscarf is only an aspect of this experience - to convenient racial stereotypes. Moreover, discussions of Muslim women have tended to focus and revolve around veiling and unveiling, as if this were the only obstacle to Muslim women's liberation and the only means to improve their status. I find the recurrence of this topic to be governed partially by the remnants of colonial modernization discourses, which claimed that women's freedom is dependent upon unveiling. Within feminist discourse, it is entwined with an attempt on the behalf of some Western feminists, still under the influence of second wave feminism, to apply their historical and political paradigms upon other societies, without taking into consideration varied conceptions of time, space, privacy, and historical and political specificity.

To avoid this prevalent one-dimensional rhetoric, scholarship on the headscarf/veil/*hijab*, should stress the experience of *wearing* the headscarf as it is analyzed in relation to global fashion trends. As an instance of fashion, the headscarf can be interpreted as a form of self expression. Accordingly, these women's experiences of wearing the headscarf need to be initiated through attempts at mutual understanding and dialogue to avoid the mere bridging of gaps. This explains the questionability of reducing the varied experiences of veiling to absolute identities since discrepancies take place when "[p]eople become bearers of the differences that the rhetoric of absolute identity invents" (Gilroy 104). It is within such a context that we can interpret Kahf's reinvention of Sheherazade, an exoticized figure in mainstream American representations often conceived in highly sexualized or oppressed terms, as a form of resistant mimicry.

Yegenoglu discusses the liberating power of mimicry arguing that "[t]he re-articulation, reworking and re-signification of the discursive characteristics of phallocentricism can open the possibility for an in-between ambivalent zone where the agency of the female subject can be construed" (65). When *odalisques* and Sheherazades are reintroduced, and reworked, this mimicry subversively resists dominant representations of Muslim women. Consequently, the act of mimicking literary characters like Sheherazade and their narratives with an awareness of the history of fetishized representations they recall, becomes an active resistance to such representations. Latent Orientalist discursive practices shaping the representations of Muslim women are interrogated through the transformative power of Sheherazadian narrative as it becomes a tool of racial and cultural resistance. Kahf's poem "So You Think You Know Scheherazad" exemplifies this.

Kahf's poem "So You Think You Know Scheherazad" asks a rather cynical question with regards to attempts at reaching final interpretations of Sheherazade's narrative. In this poem, Kahf questions translations of Sheherazade's narrative as a source of healing which "invent[s] fairy creatures / who will grant you wishes" (4-5, 44). Kahf here challenges prevalent interpretations of the purpose of Sheherazade's storytelling to be therapeutic, healing Shahriyar. Instead Kahf designates Sheherazade's storytelling as a fearful and troubling narrative. She reinvents and reinterprets the prevalent roles assigned to Sheherazade arguing that "Scheherazad awakens / the demons under your bed [...] she unleashes, / the terrors that come from / within you and within her" (7-8; 19-21, 44). Hence, Sheherazade challenges and shocks those who attempt to confine her within set roles and identities. In a sense, she instigates transformation and is an actuation of the

translational process with its "splintered potentialities." Her tales are not mere forms of entertainment, but narratives which challenge stasis and invite transformation. The Sheherazadian narrative then comes into play poetically, throughout this collection of poetry by narrating how these Muslim-American women fabricate their multiple affiliations. The diasporic experiences which these Muslim-American women experience display the urgent need for developing discourses, of belonging and affiliation. Accordingly, the Sheherazadian narrative in Kahf's poetry functions through "articulation," as it actuates a point of separation, an instance of incomprehension, a crisis of translation which simultaneously creates motion and change. The fact that Sheherazade's narrative "awakens" and revives what we avoid and seek to hide explains why this diasporic narrative functions through transformation.

In her poem, "My Body is not Your Battleground" Kahf faces various attempts to pin down the practice of wearing the headscarf even to anticolonial nationalistic narratives arguing, "My body is not your battleground / My hair is neither sacred nor cheap, / neither the cause of your disarray / nor the path to your liberation" (10-12, 58). This body/nation metaphor is one that many third world feminists question. Sara Suleri in *The Rhetoric of English India* discusses the ethical validity of allegories like the woman/ nation allegory arguing that "[i]f nation is to be syncopated into body, then cultural studies must face a reading of imperialism that is prepared to accommodate the exigencies of what a racial gaze may signify to a postcolonial reading of gender" (18). Zohreh Sullivan points to women's domination of the cultural imaginary as symbols of national identity since " 'woman' has repeatedly been constituted as the overdetermined sign of an essentialized totality, as a sign of an essentialized totality, as a metaphor for a

besieged nation, an embattled self, a delicate interiority, the uncontrollable other" (228). In this poem she attempts to contest representations of her Muslim body. Kahf justifies her own use of the term "Muslim" in her study of patterns in Western representations of the Muslim woman:

> The same objections can be raised about the term "the Muslim woman." Is it not too nebulous and ahistorical? [...] Such distinctions may be valid when it comes to social science analysis of women in Islam. However, a basic point of this book is to rip apart at the seams the apparent fit between 'the Muslim woman' as the object of representation in Western texts and real Muslim women with live cells and nerves. (*Western Representations* 3)

For Kahf, then, the "monolithic Muslim woman" is the mythic "object of representation" that she seeks to dismantle by deconstructing the aggregation of images associated with her. She foregrounds the lived experience of being Arab-American, wearing the headscarf, and negotiating cultures. Kahf argues that fixed, exotic representations of Muslim women can also be written by Muslim women writers because "the issue is not the identity of the author but the mobilization of the core 'Western' narrative" which is a narrative "shaped by the literary conventions, linguistic tropes, and narrative processes within Western cultural traditions" (*Western Representations* 3-4). Figuring the role of the Sheherazadian narrative in relation to such "Western" narratives of representation is one of the aims of this study. Moreover, this study seeks to explore to what extent Arab women writers adhere to, challenge, and develop the Sheherazadian narrative in the diaspora to resist being raced as the "Oriental" Sheherazade.

In this sense, a discussion of Muslim-American women's identities linked to a politically charged article of dress like the *hijab* or headscarf becomes a cultural instance of competing translations of the correlatives of identification processes. In the diaspora, the direct ramifications of competing representations of Muslim women and actual Muslim women's experiences take place and Kahf draws attention to this in her poems. Fatema Mernessi studies the relationship between these competing representations of Muslim women in *Scheherazade Goes West.* She considers how the term harem was translated through the reception of her novel *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood.* During her book tour to publicize *Dreams,* journalists constantly ask Mernessi whether she was really raised in a harem. After answering in the affirmative, Mernessi realizes that the Western narrative of exoticism ascribed to the Muslim woman is one circumscribed during the translation process. In agreement with Timothy Weiss I find translation as an interpretative approach to be quite productive due to its stress upon meanings as residing in the intentional relationship between the mind and world. The reader plays a very active role and hence an analysis of what shapes his/her readings becomes important. Translation as interpretation seeks to prefigure "'possible worlds,' which concomitantly depend on the reader's constructions" (8). Moreover, through an understanding of translation as interpretation, meaning is produced so that readers create particular textual readings since "[t]o read is to put a text in a new context" (8). Accordingly, such an analysis helps to discern how these reporters formed their exotic translations of the harem.

Mernessi clarifies that for her "not only is the word 'harem' a synonym for the family as an institution, but it would also never occur to [her] to associate it with

something jovial" (*Scheherazde* 12). On the other hand, the smiles with sexual undertones that Mernessi got from reporters upon stating that she was raised in a harem draw attention to the fact that "[t]he journalists were perceiving a 'harem' that was invisible to [her]" (13). She goes on to describe the clash between the two harems arguing "[m]y harem was associated with a historical reality. Theirs was associated with artistic images created by famous painters such as Ingres, Matisse, Delacroix, or Picasso -who reduced women to odalisques [*sic*]" (14). Her analysis of the West's perceptions of Muslim women and the cloud of invisible "Oriental" representations surrounding them is central because it designates how translations preconceive possible worlds constructed by the interpreters or translators. When Mernessi describes the journalists perceiving a "harem invisible to (her)," she is calling attention to an experience similar to what Kahf refers to in her "Hijab Scene # 3" poem when one of her characters experiences "the positronic force field of hijab." In Trekki register "a positronic force field" refers to a barrier that prevents communication (17, 25). Kahf designates herself as attempting to cross over such barriers and exoticized discursive practices of "othering" by stating, "I'm a Muslim woman, not a Klingon" (16, 25). She then goes on to underline her various attempts at communication to overcome any conceived barriers: "I sent up flares, / beat on drums, waved navy flags, / tried smoke signals, American Sign Language, / Morse code, Western Union, telex, fax," (10-13, 25).

Through Kahf's reinterpretation of Sheherazade's narrative in her collection of poetry, another facet of Arab-American women's diasporic identity is deconstructed, as the Orientalist representations of Muslim women are introduced and questioned. In the collection of poems, which Kahf refers to as e-mails, the stereotypes which Muslim-

American women struggle with when they choose to wear the headscarf/veil/*hijab* are introduced and interrogated in relation to national narratives which designate the limits of belonging and passing. Katherine Bullock points out, "The popular media's presentation of hijab as foreign is especially problematic for Muslim women in the West, who are challenged to prove that wearing hijab does not violate Western [civil as opposed to barbaric] values" (134). In these poems, the stereotypical Orientalist representations of Muslim women are deconstructed and the precarious relationship between dress, diasporic identities, and affiliations are foregrounded and examined. Expressions of collective identity like the headscarf are explored in relation to border crossings. In the introductory lines to this chapter from the "Hijab Scene #7" poem, Kahf deals with some of the prevalent stereotypical suppositions related to the veil/*hijab*/headscarf in the diasporic context. The veil is a rather ambiguous term which can refer to covering of the face and body, or merely the covering of the head and body. Ahmed clarifies that the reappearance of the hijab in the seventies in Egypt for example was characterized by "a variety of styles of headgear" and that "[b]oth men and women conforming to this code have developed styles of dress that are essentially quite new" (220). The *hijab* we see now then is not only an ethnic traditional mode of dress, which opens its analysis in relation to the realm of fashion.

In this sense, the innovation that Kahf brings to the Sheherazadian narrative, as a diasporic narrative, is that she shapes it as a tool of resistance which deconstructs Muslim women as objects of representation in the diaspora. This turn in analysis seeks to reinstate the affiliations of a visible minority within the American nation, at a historical moment when such women are often positioned as social outsiders. An example of the

discrimination which many Muslim women who choose to wear the headscarf experience is exemplified in an ABC primetime special entitled "How Muslims are treated in the U.S.A" presented by John Kenioness which documents the mistreatment that women wearing the headscarf can experience in the Diaspora. A confrontation between a Muslim woman wearing a headscarf and a cashier who refuses to serve her is staged in front of customers in a convenience store and out of forty-one customers who witness the incident; twenty-two do nothing, six side with the cashier, while thirteen challenge his behaviour. This experiment is regarded as hopeful according to Professor Jack Dovidio of Yale who organized it. This is due to the fact that at least thirteen of the customers side with the Muslim woman.

The brief "*Hijab* Scene" poems satirically describe some of the stereotypical representations affixed to these women. Reductionist interpretations of the headscarf that seek to frame it within a paradigm of fetishization or oppression are resisted. Faegheh Shirazi discusses the various interpretations appendaged to veiling arguing against reductive interpretations of it; "[s]ome people think of the veil as erotic and romantic, others perceive it as a symbol of oppression, still others consider it a sign of piety, modesty, or purity. It has become so ubiquitous that everyone seems to have formed an opinion about it. The various connotations it has, the many emotions it arouses, testify to its continuing, perhaps even growing, significance in the modern world" (180).
Such an analysis posits the multiple intersections of historical, political, and personal contexts of wearing the headscarf in the diaspora as related to a transformative understanding of ethnicity "as the combined production of external and internal boundaries and mediation by the Subject" (Mc Andrew 160). The intersecting correlatives

of external historical and political contexts, personal positions along with the agency of the subject should all work together in shaping a transformative understanding of Muslim women wearing the headscarf in the diaspora. In the "*Hijab* Scene" poems, spontaneously spread out throughout the volume, the complications and dispersions related to wearing the headscarf in the diaspora are introduced. In these brief poems, Kahf fragments monolithic representations of Muslim women who choose to wear the headscarf, troubling attempts to read individual women as representative of all Muslim women. In this manner, she seeks to redefine the parameters of collective identity markers in the diaspora, opening up collective identity to nuances of difference and arguing for the possibility of remaining individual within the collective. The Sheherazadian narrative is dispersed into multiple narratives as different narrators assume the narrator's position. There is no singular, auto- biographical narrative through which we can trace a single trajectory of diasporic experience. By constantly shifting her narrators in these poems, we are introduced to a wide spectrum of fragmented experiences which draw the reader's attention to the context instead of the characters and their development. In this manner, Kahf fragments the collective identity category, opening it up to the differences which ensue from positionality. Avtar Brah describes this positionality as processual in as far as 'diaspora space' is a space "where difference and commonality are figured in non-reductive relationality" (248). Within such a context of relationality a politics of identification replaces a politics of identity so that we appreciate the "particular" within the "universal" and the "universal" within the "particular" (93). Such an understanding of collective identity suggests that "identity is neither fixed nor singular; rather it is a

constantly changing relational multiplicity. But during the course of this flux identities do assume specific patterns" (Brah 123).

The experiences of women wearing the face veil in "My Babysitter Wears a Face-Veil" are juxtaposed to a denial of opposing claims of identity in "Ishtar Awakens in Chicago," ascertaining that these women's struggles spring from the same Orientalist discursive practices which reduce them to passivity and silence. We are introduced to how the headscarf, in the diaspora, complicates issues of stable identity because it signals affiliation as well as disaffiliation to one's new nation. These women map out multiple affiliations upon their female bodies; this mapping cannot really be conceived as a reduction of women's bodies to a metaphorical and metonymic anatomy because it specifies these women as agents active in shaping the social and material specificities of living in the diaspora, through their choice of dress. These material specificities are detailed in the "*Hijab* Scene" poems.

Making a Scene: "*Hijab* Scenes"

In the "*Hijab* Scene #3" poem, the narrator describes a situation in which she is not deemed American enough to be able to join the PTA while a "regular American mother" beside her is:

> "Would you like to join the PTA?" she repeated.
>
> "I would," I said,
>
> But I could've been antimatter.
>
> A regular American mother next to me
>
> Shrugged and shook her head.

.....

"Dammit, Jim, I'm a Muslim woman, not a Klingon!"

---but the positronic force field of hijab

Jammed all her cosmic coordinates. (5-9; 16-18, 25)

Here Kahf describes the narrator wearing the headscarf as an alien being, through the use of "Trekkie" register and referring to her as a "Klingon." Paradoxically, this Muslim woman is American enough to be familiar with several American means of communication: "Western Union," "American Sign Language" as well as the Trekkie register of avid Star Trek fans and yet is not American enough for this woman to consider her eligible for the PTA.

In the section of the "*Hijab* Scene #7" poem introducing this chapter, Kahf directly addresses some of the common misconceptions surrounding women who choose to wear the headscarf. Experiences of interrogation become a common aspect of their lives in the diaspora. Kahf satirically lists some interrogational processes that position her as an outsider:

What else do you need to know

relevant to my buying insurance,

opening a bank account,

reserving a seat on a flight? (7-10, 39)

It is these interrogational processes, which serve to limit the movement and spatial freedom of these women. The "*Hijab* Scene #2" and "*Hijab* Scene #1" poems question claims regarding the constrictive nature of wearing a headscarf by comparing it to other items of women's dress: "You people have such restrictive dress for women, / she said,

hobbling away in three-inch heels and panty hose" (1-2, 42). In the "*Hijab* Scene #1" poem, a girl experiences peer pressure to conform in her mode of dress from a young man, who himself challenges conformity in fashion: "'You dress strange,' said a tenth-grade boy with bright blue hair to the new Muslim girl with the headscarf in homeroom," (1-2, 41). Through these brief poems, Kahf hints at the intersections between the headscarf and fashion, as the headscarf is compared and contrasted to other forms of fashionable expression. An analysis of the headscarf corresponding to fashion sheds light upon the empowering and at times limiting role of fashion in reshaping representations of Muslim women. Whether fashion is a space of resistance or a space for the reinscription of global hegemonic power, a multiplicity of meanings are appendaged to this over-signified item of dress, inviting its analysis within the context of fashion.

Fashioning a New *Hijab*

There is a direct correlation between monolithic translations of Islam and its representations in culture; such translations constantly seek to interpret it in terms of binary opposition to the West, irrespective of the historical and geographical intersections between both cultures historically. Samaa Abdurraqib argues that "when Muslim women are placed at the center of these binary oppositions [...] the divisions between 'us and them' are relied upon more heavily. Islam becomes the religion of the 'other' and the culture from which women need to be liberated [...] women are held accountable for both religious and cultural traditions" (56). Women who choose to wear the headscarf are often forced into binary positions of belonging, or not belonging, because wearing this item of clothes is often seen as a form of dress at odds with general fashion trends. In order to

counter these reductive interpretations, Muslim women's forms of dress should become a site for the exploration of multiple affiliations and deconstruction of restrictive conceptions of nation and affiliation. Such attempts at redefining prevalent representations of the headscarf, in many Middle Eastern countries as well as in the West, are becoming increasingly enveloped within the discourse of fashion magazines. *Hijab Fashion* magazine, a monthly fashion magazine published in Cairo Egypt, is one such example. *Muslim Girl* magazine, which is published in the United States is another example. This fashion magazine reinvents the shapes, folds and cuts of the head-scarf, opening up the possibility of studying the intersections of the headscarf, identity and fashion. Though attempts to refashion the headscarf can be interpreted within the boundaries of global capital and its control of world economy, religion, culture, and our very identities, conceiving this turn to fashion positively produces an active engagement with global capital frameworks establishing that there is no possible beyond to the differential play conveyed through clothing. Barnard argues, "Fashion and clothing [...] are themselves undecidable in terms of these oppositions. They are not simply decidable in terms of public/private, subject/object, appearance/concealment, modesty/seduction, individual/group" because "difference produces meanings" hence negating a need for an escape from fashion (Barnard 175). In this sense, fashion and clothing "as evidence of creativity and cultural production" embody how difference produces meanings, inviting an interpretation of the intersection of fashion and the headscarf (Barnard 175). This "fashionable" instance of globalization deserves analysis because it carries within it the *threads* of "*bricolage.*" In this sense, the new headscarf - as it is now fashionably wrought in these fashion magazines - can be interpreted in terms of mixing elements of ethnic and

folk fashion with world fashion *creating* in the process a new and distinct living experience of wearing the scarf with a difference. This troubles the negative connotations appended to this article of clothes commonly portrayed in popular media; "*[b]ricolage*, like retro, implies the creation of new meanings from the materials and styles taken from the past" (Barnard 167). Kahf's "Hijab Scene" poems can be interpreted as an attempt at *bricolage* of the *hijab*, as fetishized odalisques and Sheherazades assume *new* meanings through their reintroduction within a twenty-first century context. Within this context, the *Hijab Scene* poems can be read as e-mail messages from Sheherazade and the decision of some of the *odalisques* to wear the headscarf *in* "*Thawrah des* Odalisques at the Matisse Retrospective" as a creative reformulation of an item of dress overburdened by reductive interpretations.

The headscarf for Muslim women living in the diaspora is not an essentialist expression of identity because it stabilizes and destabilizes identity: "visible markers both stabilize their identity as Muslim while simultaneously destabilizing their identity by constantly calling into question the degree to which they have become 'American'" (Abdurraqib 58). Accordingly, collective markers of identity cannot only be interpreted as reductive attempts to essentialize identity, since this choice of dress within the diasporic context, destabilizes these women's position within American identity narratives. In this manner, the headscarf is forced within binary modes of thought which fix these women within the context of clashing Eastern and Western civilizations, predetermining their position as oppressed. Orientalist discursive practices shape interpretations of these Muslim women; folk cultural figures like Sheherazade and Ishtar are reduced to passive *odalisques*. Kahf chooses to revive these characters to reanimate them, undermining

rhetorics of exoticism and disempowerment. To do so, she stresses the "lived experience" of wearing the headscarf/*hijab* in the diaspora, in her "*Hijab* Scene" poems. By concentrating upon the particularities of the practice of wearing the headscarf in the diaspora, the boundaries set between Western women and women who choose to wear the headscarf are deconstructed. Experiences of discrimination align women who choose to wear the headscarf with other members of visible racial minorities.

In this sense, the Sheherazadian narrative, as a Muslim-American women's narrative strives to interrogate stabilized identity narratives. This narrative is further reshaped by Kahf as she fragments Sheherazade's experience, dispersing it in her collection of poems. The Sheherazadian narrative as a diasporic narrative of dispersal, constantly looks both backwards and forwards to a homeland left behind, as well as to a new home built in the diaspora. In the poem "Voyager Dust," Kahf describes this experience of dislocation. In this poem, Kahf refers to collective memory as residing in her mother's scarves; "My mother had voyager's dust in her scarves [...] It was Syria in her scarves" (10, 25, 1). The narrator of this poem, the daughter of a Syrian immigrant woman, describes in these lines the multiple allegiances that shape a life in the diaspora, which always carries the dust or trace of an "other" homeland. She designates the scarf as an example of such a trace. The "voyager dust" is not however completely described in positive terms. The pain of memory is wrought in its very threads since it always promises a return: "*We will meet again*" (9, 1). It is also a narrative that evokes a rupture as expressed in the line which describes the "voyager dust" to be "like the ash / of debris after the destruction of a city" (18-19, 1). The dust is a trace of the homeland as well as clothing. This trace is not only in her mother's Syrian scarves, but can also be discerned

in the "downy sweater" of a Chinese woman (4, 1). Throughout the poem, we can discern an ambivalence towards the headscarf which undermines attempts at reducing it to an act of collective identity that expresses cultural ties, since within the context of diaspora it also becomes a source of stigmatization that undermines national allegiance because it connotes a dual orientation: one towards a current homeland and another towards an "other" homeland. It is this dual orientation that complicates the communicative message the scarf expresses in the Arab-American diaspora.

This poem enacts the ambiguity which the headscarf/*hijab* conveys as a result of its pervading translations in the diaspora. It also explains the increasing role of fashion in re-shaping these connotations. Attempts at this revamping in relation to fashion can be traced in teen magazines like *Muslim Girl.* Fashion and the headscarf in such magazines represents a borderline space, where modification and adaptation to individual needs can take place and new meanings can emerge. It is a space where the boundaries of collective identities can be extended and reinvented: "[f]ashion enables individuals to deal with themselves as persons and as social objects. It makes possible both individuation and social connectedness" (Rubinstein 206). The productive liminality of fashion lies in its ambiguous position between individual and group expression, which opens space for "correcting the image" since "it allows individuals to pursue competing desires for group identity and for individual expression" (Rubinstein 206). It is this possibility for change and correction, which makes the relationship between fashion and the headscarf a fertile space for redefinition. A program on "Muslim women and Fashion" aired on *The Today Show* on July 15th, 2007, which commented upon the appearance of *Muslim Girl Magazine* and traced some of the developments of wearing the headscarf in relation to

fashion, foregrounding how young American women are creatively weaving a space for themselves within such a network of relationships. Moreover, the teen magazine *Muslim Girl* presents its launching copy with a young woman wearing the American flag as a headscarf with three stars on her cheek, giving new meaning to the Star Spangled Banner. All of these developments are happening quickly and are worthy of close and careful analysis. It must be noted here that due to the recent economic crisis and the overall decline in the print industry, it has become increasingly difficult for owners of such private interest magazines like *Muslim Girl Magazine* to continue publishing. They have suspended publication as of April/May 2008. In this sense, the new *hijab* appears to function as both a commodity fetish which fulfills the needs of a capitalist "modernizing" society as well as a libidinal fetish which is an object that creates those needs.

A Synergy of Scarves

Joanne Eicher and Barbara Sumberg argue that an adherence to ethnic dress exhibits a preservation of the past as well as change ("World Fashion" 295-296). Moreover, they argue that it is impossible in a world of globalization to speak strictly of ethnic dress since "World, ethnic, and national dress are inter-related in today's global community" ("World Fashion" 304). Accordingly, it is useless to discuss the headscarf without relating it to particular historical and political contexts: "Different societies invest covering with different meanings. Some women cover from custom, others owing to state law, others in a secularizing society for various personal reasons [...] like any piece of clothing the social meaning of the *hijab* depends upon the context in which it is worn" (Bullock 86). Eicher seeks to renovate conceptions of dress by arguing that our analysis

of dress should stress the social role of dress in society "as a sensory system of non-verbal communication" (*Introduction* 5). An analysis of the headscarf in relation to fashion can on the one hand be interpreted as a direct representation of globalized capitalism and its ever-present monopolization of our experiences; it can also be considered a positive reconceptualization of this piece of dress itself. Joanne Eicher and Barbara Sumberg argue that world fashion eases communication because "[t]he similarity of world fashion garments, hairstyles, and cosmetics allows individuals to convey to others that they are not members of an esoteric group and consequently open to communication with others" ("World Fashion" 304). The many theoretical debates regarding veiling as a mode of oppression as well as seduction fail to take into consideration that first and foremost the veil is an item of clothing, which relates it to fashion.

If clothes and the manner in which one dresses are a "coded sensory system of non-verbal communication that aids human interaction in space and time facilitat[ing] or hinder[ing] consequent verbal or other communication" then it is not improbable for people to attempt to express an adherence to a certain ethical code of conduct through their clothes ("Introduction," Eicher 1). Muslim women who wear the headscarf convey their right to privacy from the intrusive gaze, their statement that their bodies are their own business as well as their reconceptualization of the feminine beauty system and its idealised images of femininity. Wearing the headscarf can hence be interpreted as an active attempt to inscribe meanings upon the female body. Reformulating the headscarf's connection to fashion in this manner represents an interesting site where women can control and shape their relationship to the feminine beauty system, as well as their own experience and need for privacy.

For Fadwa El Guindi, the headscarf communicates different conceptions of time and space within Islamic culture. The headscarf can then embody a conception of a fluid mobile privacy related to Islam's fluid conception of sacred and worldly space and time which allows for "interweaving of space and time, as individuals move in and out during the course of the day between worldly and sacred spheres" (79). A feminist interpretation of such allotment of public and private space as patriarchally assigned would not be relevant here, because it would be shaped by a restricted interpretation of space influenced by Western binary paradigms which set the public and private in strict opposition, assigning a singular meaning for the public and private. El Guindi argues, "A distinctive quality of the Islamic construction of space is how it turns a public area into a private space, without the entry of a stranger. It enables ordinary Muslims temporarily to convert any worldly place [...] into a sacred space set apart" (78). Binary interpretations of the public and private ignore the historically and geographically positioned nature of a term like privacy, which varies according to cultural context. Privacy is not a universal term with universal meaning; in the Arabic language it has no exact linguistic referent; "Arab privacy does not connote the 'personal,' the 'secret' or the 'individuated space.' It concerns two core spheres - women and the family [...] For women it is both a right and an exclusive privilege, and is reflected in dress, space, architecture and proxemic behaviour" (El Guindi 82). In contrast to binary structures of thought, which insist that the private and public are in opposition, El Guindi invites us to consider privacy as "characterized by the spatial and temporal interweaving pattern- the moving between sacred space and time and ordinary worldly space and time throughout the day every day. Sacred space and rhythmic time are both public and private" (81). Such a different

understanding of space does not necessarily entail a cultural relativism, but is rather an authentic and alternative space, allowing for culturally specific authentication. Through such an encouragement of pluralism, feminism can be redefined as an emancipatory activism rather than by an ethno-centric ideal. Within such a context, the headscarf can be interpreted as a feminist act. The headscarf reflects this malleable understanding of privacy, which is not understood as restriction, but rather as a right and privilege through which the fluidity of the demarcations between the private and public make it an experience of interweaving of both.

In addition to issues of the private and public, the choice of some Muslim women to wear the headscarf in the diaspora intersects with a need to express an affiliation to a collective identity even though there are complications related to assuming a collective identity whose boundaries surpass national affiliations. Kwame Anthony Appiah summarizes the problems inherent to this when he argues "[m]ost collective identities connect us to strangers, people whom we will never meet [...] If, as I say, you come to interpret and shape your sense of yourself, and your life, through such identifications, the conduct of perfect strangers may inspire in you feelings of pride or shame. These identifications will help determine your projects, and help provide reasons for action." (*The Ethics of Identity* 242). Accordingly, women wearing the headscarf can be interpreted as communicating their allegiance to a collective identity, with which they may not necessarily completely identify. This collective identity is multivocal, expressing the multivalent nature of collective identities in the diaspora. This, if anything, draws attention to the need for a dialogue which seeks to foreground an awareness of the contingent nature of the collective. Subsequently, translating the Muslim woman and headscarf only in terms of

oppression is a denial of this multivalent expression. El-Guindi points to the ubiquitous nature of this item of dress; "Furthermore, 'veil' as commonly used gives the illusion of having a single referent, whereas it ambiguously refers at various times to a face cover for women, a transparent head cover, and an elaborate headdress. Limiting its reference obscures historical developments, cultural differentiations of social context, class, or special rank, and socio-political articulations. In Western feminist discourse 'veil' is politically charged with connotations of the inferior 'other,' implying and assuming a subordination and inferiority of the Muslim woman" (157).

Appiah designates the ability to follow each other's narratives (a form of translation) as an important aspect in cultural translation: "the grasp of a narrative logic [...] allows us to construct the world to which our imaginations respond [...] we make sense of our lives through narrative, [...] [W]e see our actions and experiences as part of a story. And the basic human capacity to grasp stories, even strange stories, is also what links us, powerfully, to others, even strange others" (257). This "grasping of stories" as referred to by Appiah can be useful, but it still can never overcome the hierarchical categorization of experience which is found in the descriptive word "strange," which he uses to refer to these stories, drawing attention to their alterity. As "a strange story," the headscarf/*hijab* in Kahf's poems can communicate collective identity narratives in the diaspora which question the oppressive connotations appended to it by mainstream media such as the silent "bundles in black" stereotype in Hollywood movies (*Reel Bad Arabs*). Concurrently, such narratives seek to deconstruct the Orientalist sediments shaping these racialized representations. In this sense, the headscarf in the diaspora constantly calls attention to the imposed hierarchical categories which assign terms like freedom, choice,

and women's independence to different cultures. It draws attention to the danger of formulating "first world," feminist grand emancipatory narratives, which seek to impose set notions of modernization upon the woman who wears a headscarf, drawing attention instead to the multiplicity of veiling practices. It becomes increasingly apparent that the headscarf, within the diasporic context, invites a dual-pronged analysis, which should take into consideration the fact that different social contexts play a role in reshaping diasporic identities and their cultural productions. New meanings shape old experiences, making analyses of wearing the headscarf contingent upon specific historical and cultural situatedness.

Meyda Yegeneglu's study of the *hijab* in Iran and Turkey exemplifies an attempt at forging more positioned analysis. A positioned analysis for Yegeneglu is rooted in a critique of colonial and Orientalists's essentialist binary interpretations. Yegeneglu argues that the fascination of Western countries with veiling is rooted in the construction of static essentialist categories of colonizer/colonized, civilized/uncivilized which cannot merely be undermined by the reversal of the paradigm of colonization through historical specificity because such an attempt ignores the fact that essentialism inheres in binary opposition (22-24). Yegeneglu like Edward Said draws attention to the importance of discursive analysis: "[T]o understand the complexity of the unity of colonialism and colonial discourse we need to conceive of it as a network of codes, imageries, signs and representations" (38). She stresses that the only way to undermine essentialism is by studying how it becomes naturalized. Studying this process of naturalization is one of the aims of this study. Interpretations of the headscarf as oppressive have been naturalized by these binary modes of thought. Fashion, as a new correlative shaping the experience of

wearing the headscarf, becomes a viable tool of analysis, since it undermines essentialist interpretations, when the wearer uses it with an awareness of its challenge to social and cultural preconceptions often experienced in the diaspora.

Such a theorization of fashion, covering, and the body in relation to rewriting and inscription invites an attempt to link women's subjectivities and social positions to the specificities of their bodies in a corporeal feminist analysis. Accordingly, a theorization of covering should seek to link understandings of privacy, resistance to exoticized images, and attempts at redefining the headscarf in relation to fashion. In such a theoretical attempt, mind/body dualisms are designated as social constructions and a conception of bodies as "historical, social, cultural weavings of biology" is favoured (Grosz 12). Choosing to cover within such a context may hence be regarded as one means of conceiving/inscribing a particular historical, social, and cultural situation. If wearing the headscarf can be interpreted within the context of body inscription, one can interpret it as a mediation of a different understanding of the body and privacy. Prevalent Western discourses of femininity and dress disregard the agency of women, who choose to wear the headscarf. Sherin Saadallah argues that within third wave feminism, there is space for inclusivity of commonalities which addresses difference. A feminist conceptualization of the headscarf in the diaspora entails an embrace of such diversity, which is a central component of feminism today (219). This stance rejects some second wave feminist attempts at fitting all women into set monolithic structures.What such feminist interpretations of the headscarf fail to take into consideration is that these procedures of inscribing upon the body require the active compliance of the female subject, particularly in the diasporic context. The Sheherazadian narrative becomes then an *odalisque's* tale of

bodily inscription, as these objects of Orientalist paintings challenge the fetishization of their bodies.

Odalisques between the Mind and Body

Odalisque is a Turkish word that refers to a harem slave servant. This word is used most commonly in the West to refer to harem slaves, despite the fact that the Arabic word used for harem slave is *jarya.* Fatema Mernessi distinguishes between the linguistic connotations of these two words suggesting the exotic, Orientalist leanings shaping Western representations of Eastern women in the translation of this word: "[w]hile *odalisque* refers to a space, *jarya* refers to an activity [...] It comes from 'Jariy,' to run" (*Scheherazade* 36). In *Scheherzade Goes West*, Mernessi draws stark contrasts between the figure of Sheherazade in the West and East, as she attempts to understand the statuesque Sheherazades created by Western artists. She compares Western and Eastern representations of the figure of Sheherazade, comparing fantasies of this figure in both cultures to deconstruct essentialist, exotic translations of Sheherazade. The contrast she designates between the different interpretations of this figure is summarized in her reaction to the representation of Sheherazade after watching a German ballet about her:

> The Oriental Scheherazade does not dance like the one I saw in the German ballet. Instead, she thinks and strings words into stories [...] the Oriental Scheherazade is purely cerebral, and that is the essence of her sexual attraction [...] You hardly pay attention to her body, so powerful is the spell of her fragile call for dialogue in the quiet night. (39)

In this sense, Mernessi argues for the intellectual empowerment that Sheherazade represents as the storyteller, arguing for the central position of such a role as opposed to the seductive role she plays in most popular Western representations of her. For example, the the back cover of the DVD version of Walter Wanger's *Arabian Nights,* Sheherazade is described as "a sensual, gorgeous dancing girl." This is an interesting transformation of her original role in *The Nights* as the vizier's storytelling daughter. Such a change is particularly interesting, because it signals deliberate exoticization of the Eastern woman. Shahin argues that the representation of Arab women in Hollywood films is shaped by mythologies which viewers embrace despite realities. He points out the three stereotypes through which we are introduced to the Arab woman: the highly sexualized belly dancer, the ruthless bomber and terrorist, and finally the submissive bundle in black.
In her poems, "*Thawrah des* Odalisques at the Matisse Retrospective" and "If the Odalisques" Kahf translates the problems of corporeality facing "post-odalisquesque" Muslim women, suggesting that the figure of the *odalisque* plays a role in predetermining representations of Muslim women. The *odalisque's* passive portrayal in Western European paintings is a main element in shaping the exoticization of Arab and Muslim women's representations to this day. Jack Shaheen argues that image makers today have inherited the fabricated Orientalist images of the past conjured up by English and French artists and writers uncritically recycling them into the "instant Ali Baba kit" of dancing girls and deserts (*Reel Bad Arabs*).

Malek Alloula in his study *The Colonial Harem* discusses how the Algerian woman's body becomes a site of contestation through its commodification as a tool of tourism and fascination. Through an analysis of the bored, half- naked prostitutes which

French photographers had to exploit economically in order to photograph, the "phantasm of the Oriental female and, her inaccessibility behind the veil in the forbidden harem" is constructed (xiv). The *odalisque* is the visual signified of seduction where the Arab and Muslim woman's body is reduced to a fetish object, to be uncovered in excitement by the colonial male surveyor's eye. Frozen in eternal poses of passive exoticism, the *odalisques* incarnate Orientalism and how as Jane Miller argues Orientalism is a "seductive theory about seduction" (Miller 114). The East as a woman seduces the colonizer with its flashes of difference, as well as its reassurance of Western superiority "The East also *is* a woman, however: a womb, female in its vulnerability and weakness and otherness and in its seductiveness, fertility and profitability" (Miller 115). Kahf directly hails this relation between imperialist history and Orientalist representations in her poem "If the Odalisques" where she depicts the *odalisques* getting up and leaving their paintings so that they leave "a big hole in the wall [...] between those two great / thighs of the world" (6, 10-11, 70). In this manner, the sexual adventure and the colonial adventure are shown to be integrally intertwined in a manner that seeks to deconstruct the Orientalist obsession with the Eastern woman, her confinement and her unveiling. Miller argues, "[a] prevailing imagery of penetration, of stamina and of the eventual discovery of the strange and the hidden at the end of a journey requiring courage and cunning serves to merge the colonizing adventure definitively with the sexual adventure" (117).

The *odalisques* mostly opt for some form of covering their bodies or their heads, which implicitly deconstructs the imperialist act of unveiling them as well as the persistent myth that unveiling is ceremoniously the first step towards female empowerment and liberation. Leila Ahmed argues that the feminist agenda set by

European colonialists like Cromer were vague and irrelevant because of their focus upon the veil. Ahmed states, "As item of clothing, however, the veil itself and whether it is worn are 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" (166). Kahf points out sarcastically how such an act of choice is often misinterpreted even by feminists; "The National Organization for Women got annoyed / after some of us put on *hijab*, / and wouldn't let us speak at their rally" (80-82, 66). In other lines, Kahf points out "Most of the Culottes and With Magnolias wanted clothes [...] the draft in the gallery had gone straight to their chests [...] Zulma reached up for us being tallest / and tore down museum banners / for the ones who wanted clothes" (54,56,62-64, 65-66). Moreover, as competing social groups attempt to fix significance to the *odalisques's* actions, Kahf stresses the role of exoticism in shaping representations as she states, "It did no good to tell them we didn't choose the poses we were painted in" (89-90, 66). The idea of resistance through taking control of modes of representation becomes a recurrent theme in the poem; "Hi I'm Odalisque with Big Breasts, / I was painted by Matisse, / but I'm in control now" (146-148, 68).

Cultural myths serve to unite a particular culture and express a unified system of beliefs. In Arabic literature and culture, Sheherazadian narrative has been an intellectual enterprise told by a master storyteller. This is particularly evident in Arab women's writing tradition. In the nineteenth-century translations of *The Nights*, as well as in mainstream American culture, Sheherazade has been relegated to the realm of the stereotype. However, Kahf's reintroduction of Sheherazade in her poems functions to refract attempts at freezing Sheherazade within a raced framework. Kahf reintroduces

Orientalist perceptions of Muslim women's identities to disperse and fracture them. In this dispersion of the Sheherazade figure, she enacts the constant workings of memory within a diasporic context, which seeks and always fails to grasp the ungraspable past. Such an attempt to forge a collective memory rooted in the ever transformative production of Sheherazadian narrative helps to shape an active, constantly developing group identity.

An "E-mail from Scheherazad"

In "E-mail from Scheherazad" Kahf introduces Sheherazade as a divorced Creative Writing professor. This is definitely a challenge to early nineteenth-century and Hollywood interpretations of Sheherazade, which foreground her role as a sexual seductress whose only purpose in life is to sustain her sexual relationship with the king. In Naguib Mahfouz's novel *Arabian Nights and Days* Sheherazade after curing Shahriyar cannot bear proximity to him. She informs her father that the Sultan smells of blood and moves psychologically closer to the Sufi Shaykh.

Sir Richard Burton's comments about Sheherazade's character in his nineteenth-century translation are an example of the Orientalist fetishization that Kahf questions. In his notes to *The Nights* Burton comments upon Sheherazade's decision to sacrifice herself to save the rest of the girls of her city saying, "[p]robably she proposed to 'Judith' the King. These learned and clever young ladies are very dangerous in the East" (887). Another change to the original frame narrative is the role each character assumes after the divorce. Dunyazad and Shahriyar "do workshops now in schools / On art and conflict resolution [...] I teach creative writing at Montclair State, / And I'm on my seventh novel

and book tour" (17-20, 43). In such a context, Sheherazade assumes control of her narrative through her power over its production. Unlike the original frame tale, where Shahriyar has Sheherazade's tales written, arguably taking away from her the power of narration, as Malti-Douglas argues, in this context Sheherazade remains in control of her writing (*Woman's Body, Woman's Word* 28). Another quite marked transformation which Kahf introduces to the original frame narrative is the stress upon the mutual development that both Sheherazade and Shahriyar gain from their relationship, instead of stressing the fact that the stories were all for the sake of his healing, "I taught him to heal / His violent streak through stories, after all, / And he helped me uncover my true call" (23-24, 43).

Sheherazadian narrative throughout *E-Mails* works to reinvent Sheherazade as well as her fashion sense, weaving this narrative within the "political language of identity [which] levels out distinctions between chosen connections and given particularities: between the person you choose to be and the things that determine your individuality by being thrust upon you" (Gilroy 106). Orientalist scholarship seeks to reduce the complex experience of what it takes to choose to wear the headscarf, and reduce it to a singular meaning without analyzing why and how this item of dress becomes imbricated within the context of Muslim and Arab women's positioned experiences and representations.[41] Irrespective of how different women choose to explain their clothing preferences, irrespective of how different scholars justify it, what needs to be foregrounded in studies of this contested subject which has over clouded the many more pressing problems of

[41] Fadwa El Guindi in *Veil: Modesty, Privacy and Resistance* and Katherine Bullock in *Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil* both argue for fragmenting prevalent hegemonic interpretations of the headscarf.

Muslim women, are the traces of Orientalism that are continuously recycled in scholarship on Muslim women's representations.

The frame narrative of endless storytelling enters a new stage in its constant transformation in the hands of diasporic women writers like Kahf, as Shahriyar disperses into a multitude of possible readers who hold the deathly sword of Orientalist interpretations above Sheherazade's head. However, Sheherazade's narrative through its re-evaluations continues to resist final interpretations and shock its Shahriyars. In one of her e-mails, Sheherazade designates the political role for her "smoke-and-mirror" poetry:

> So you think I play the multiculture card
> And sign up for affirmative action verse
> ---
> Where is the salve? We write. We recognize
> ---we must—each other in millennial glow
> Or we will die from what we do not know
> That's all these smoke-and-mirror poems do
> (1-2; 12-15, 92)

In these lines, Kahf interrogates yet another aspect of the ambiguous ethics of collective identity as it becomes a fetish object within a global politics of commodification, where one "play[s] the multicultural card" and "sign[s] up for affirmative action verse." However, she also designates the potential in collective identity discourses, particularly in the diaspora, because of the empowerment rooted in an awareness of positionality. Diasporic narratives, like those of Sheherazade, become spaces of translations through mimicry and *bricolage*. In this narrative, Arab women writers "write," "recognize," so

that we do not die "from what we do not know," so that we become actively involved in the processes of the "political language of identity." Such an involvement in negotiating the political parameters of identity seeks to distinguish between chosen connections and limitations: between chosen translations of ourselves and translations that limit us. Within this context, diasporic women's translations of the headscarf are guided by the activities of the figure of the *bricoleur,* who manages to survive and resist global fashion commodification processes by engaging and reorganizing them as tools of resistance shaping global fashion to her needs. The Sheherazadian narrative in this context designates diaspora as an experience through which one can negotiate affiliations, achieving in the process agency and a cultural "articulation" experience from which a Muslim-American diasporic can be forged.

Chapter 4

Diasporic Articulations: Performing "Sheherazadian Orality"

> Egyptian-American Rania Khalil created her short solo performance immediately after 9/11 as a response to the American flags flying everywhere on New York buildings, on cars, and on people's bodies [...] Khalil explores the relationship between a woman and the American flag. The Muslim attired woman, who covers her hair at the beginning of the piece with her own jacket, salutes a small American flag as it flies high over head, then eventually moves the flag close to her face to cover her eyes, then the flag covers her mouth acting as a veil to silence her. At the end of the piece the pole goes through her face, pushing her lips and deforming her face. - Dalia Basiouny, paper represented at Yale University's (In) Visible Minorities Conference, 2005

In Rania Khalil's brief one woman mime *Flag Piece*, Basiouny portrays Arab-American women artists's shift from writings which concentrated on metaphors of food, to performance as a space where they can publicly explore their contested hybrid identities, redefining stereotypes.[42] *Flag Piece,* in about three minutes, without any particular setting or lighting, depicts Arab-Americans's sense of abjection after the events of 9/11. Khalil uses the small American flag given to her after 9/11 by a hardware store owner, who felt

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[42] *Food For Our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists,* is an example of this approach. In this anthology of writings food is used as a metaphor for connecting to the homeland.

she needed to show her support of Americans. As a result of this ignorance of the possibility that she could be American, Khalil decides to use this prop to silently explore the boundaries of her Arab-American affiliations. The silence that Rania Khalil chooses to perform is a very relevant performance for me to begin my discussion of Sheherazadian orality, in which performers like Laila Farah and Maysoon Zayid engage; their performances along with Khalil's are all attempts to break the silence regarding the racing that these women experience in their everyday lives. Khalil's mime hence becomes an embodiment of the urgency for breaking the silence on the institutionalization of racism against Arabs particularly after 9/11. Performance provides this space where questions of race and identity are foregrounded, by being materialized on the stage. Jill Dolan in "In Defence of the Discourse: Materialist Feminism, Postmodernism, Poststructuralism and Theory" points out that assertion of identity is not the goal of performance, but the point of departure where "[i]dentity becomes a site of struggle, at which the subject organizes and reorganizes competing discourses [such as gender, race and class] as they fight for supremacy" (96-97). Performance artists' attempts hence remain in the realm of the political, because they are not merely concerned with "the superficial structure of performance, but its effect on the culture and the search for modes of effective social change" (Dolan 97).

In the last two chapters, I concentrated upon how Sheherazadian narrative in the diasporic context becomes a site where positional identifications are explored and reductive representations are undercut, in the genres of novel and poetry. In this chapter, performance in the form of one-woman shows and stand-up comedy routines foreground themselves as further sites of resistance, making Sheherazadian orality a central concern

in this chapter. Throughout this chapter, textuality and orality are explored as varied means of figuring cultural and racial identities. As a space for negotiating affiliations, these performative modes explore the connections that constitute the Arab-American identification position, which is shaped by geographical, historical, and political conditions. However, an awareness of the supple quality of these connections and their conditional nature is indicated through the varied historical backgrounds of performance artists like Laila Farah and Maysoon Zayid. Farah is a Lebanese-American, feminist, performer-scholar who currently teaches at DePaul University. She embodies the problematics of living the borders of various identity positions as an Arab, a Muslim, an American and a woman. Zayid is a Palestinian/Arab-American, activist/stand-up comedian. In a sense, these women literally perform the malleability of the gaps and bridges shaping transformative cultural identities, through an interrogation of popular representations of their race and gender. Stuart Hall points out in his essay "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" that it is important to perceive cultural identities as multiple and simultaneous so that we are aware that cultural identities are not additive but rather transformative, since our experience of each identity affects the other. Hall argues, "Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation [...] they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power" (*Contemporary Sociological Thought* 445).

Such an understanding of cultural identities as transformative is useful in helping us conceive how and why Arab and American identities are negotiated and articulated within the historical and political context of the war on terror.

In this chapter, it is Sheherazade's subversive tongue that mostly concerns this analysis. This division should not however set polar boundaries between written narrative and oral modes of expression, since postcolonial theorists and feminists have long pointed out the danger in designating strict boundaries between written and oral modes of communication. An essentialist valorization of oral expression can be dangerous because it paves the way for a romantic primitivist conception of cultures that celebrate orality as dwelling in a primordial state of innocence, which consequently invites a Western hierarchical, condescending attitude towards primarily oral cultures. In reality, there is no binary split between the oral and written and the relationship between them is much more permeable. Many diasporic writers attempt to inscribe orality in their writing directly connecting it to oral tradition.[43] These performers, by reviving orality as an aspect of their performances, resist the original English colonialist attempts at freezing the malleability of this narrative; they open up the space for further reincarnations of Sheherazade's experiences and reviving the idea of infinite creativity originally ascribed to *The Nights.* It is worthy to point out here that the reference to the number 1001 in Arabic culture has come to convey infinity. An example of the infinite connotations of this number can be found in Arabic popular culture in Egyptian Diva, Om-Kolthoum, whose well-known song entitled *One Thousand and One Nights* describes an endless, infinite relationship with a beloved.

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[43] See Gloria Anzaldua's *Borderlands/La Frontera* for a discussion of how writing comes out of storytelling traditions since according to Anzaldua one needs to believe in oneself as a speaker in order to write.

Moreover, orality is rooted in the communal since it presumes an audience, which in the Arab-American context is an audience that needs to parse the hyphen in Arab-American and how it functions. This communality was an aspect of the original Sheherazade/Shahriyar scenario, since Sheherazade was encouraged by her sister Dinarzade to tell a story every night. It is important to clarify, however, that reconnecting with these oral roots does not ensue a romanticized return to orality as an authentic source of literary expression or political activism, but rather it is a reformulation of the original oral narrative. In Farah and Zayid's performances, the resistance and urgency of the original Sheherazadian orality mixes with the complexities of straddling Arab and American cultures in a post 9/11 historical and political context. Trinh T. Minh-ha foregrounds the agential performative potentialities latent in storytelling when she discusses storytelling as a formulating aspect of re-organizing marginalized voices within feminism (*Woman, 148-149*). Sheherazadian orality can hence be interpreted as a means of re-organizing marginalized voices in feminism, attesting to the fact that feminism is not necessarily a Western invention.

Due to their choice of performance as an artistic medium through which they can challenge prevalent representations of themselves and their cultures, these women re-inscribe orality as an important aspect of Arab-American women's Sheherazadian storytelling and reposition the power politics of the Shahriyar and Sheherazade scenario. The urgency of the Shahriyar and Sheherazade scenario is recreated in the urgency to voice their experiences. They physically recreate the frame tale scenario on the stage, with themselves as the storytellers and their audience as listeners. Race and gender become central issues in the context of Laila Farah's one woman performance *Living in*

the Hyphen-Nation and Maysoon Zayid's stand-up comedy routine, against the backdrop of the Iraqi war, the war on terrorism, and the backlash experienced by Arab-Americans. Performance art as a means of self-definition became a primary tool for Arab-Americans to question prevalent stereotypes about themselves:

> Since 9/11, Arab American performances in New York City have increased substantially. In addition to autobiographical one-woman plays, documentary solo and group performance pieces, Arab-American artists have begun working together, supporting each other's productions and creating troupes such as the Nibras Theatre Collective. (Basiouny 327)

What performance as a genre offers these women is "a practice that lets [them] rehearse new social arrangements, in ways that require visceral investments of bodies, of time, of personal and cultural history" (Dolan 16). In their performances, then, these women are able to practice the possibility of representing themselves as active agents and their Arab-American identities as dynamic.

Laila Farah toured her show from 2000-2005. Some of the venues where she performed her show are the Lebanese American University, University of Iowa, New York University, University of Texas Austin, University of Illinois, Wesleyan University, University of Michigan Dearborn, the National Women's Studies Association Conference, Women in Theatre Conference and also the Guild Complex in Chicago. Maysoon Zayid has been performing her show in comedy clubs across the United States, as well as in the Arab-American Comedy Festival which she co-founded with Dean Obeidallah in 2003. The Arab-American Comedy Festival has been held at several theatres in New York: the Gotham Theater, Theater for the New City, Two Boots Pioneer

Theater and in 2009 the Zipper Theatre. These women explicitly discuss problems of race in public artistic formats, hence raising a whole set of new questions in relation to Sheherazadian orality as a public mode of performance.

By exploring Sheherazadian orality in relation to performance and how they are contextualized in the performances in this chapter, I hope to further explore how this diasporic narrative functions in performance and the space for resistance to Orientalist representational paradigms which it opens. In analyzing Sheherazadian performances, I am aware of the complex relationship that usually exists between performance and narrative. However, orality represents an integral aspect of the Sheherazadian narrative in the original frame tale, since Sheherazade told her tales to Shahriyar every night. Moreover, *The Nights* tales circulated in oral format long before they were written in the principal Arabic manuscripts. The principal Arabic manuscripts also varied in length displaying the flexible boundaries of this originally oral text. Ferial Ghazoul points to the various differences between the original Arabic sources; "Calcutta I is incomplete and covers only two hundred nights. The Leiden edition, likewise, is incomplete and covers only one hundred and fifty-two nights. Cairo I has the advantage of being the only edition based on a single manuscript, while Calcutta II and Breslau combine a number of manuscripts" (8).[44] Capturing the flexible orality, then, in a medium of performance like

[44] The main Arabic manuscripts are Calcutta I (Shirwanee edition in twelve volumes) 1814-1818, Cairo I (Bulaq edition in two volumes) 1835, Calcutta II (Macnaghten's edition in four volumes) 1839-1842, Breslau (Habicht's edition in eight volumes, plus Fleischer's edition in four volumes) 1825-1838 1842-1843, Leiden (Mahdi's edition in one volume) 1984 and numerous other editions published in Cairo and Beirut, based on modifications of Cairo I.

the one woman show and stand-up becomes very much a revival of Sheherazade's original storytelling mode of expression and the oral nature of *The Nights*. Ferial Ghazoul argues that *The Nights* defies limitation and definition because "[t]here is neither an original text nor an individual author [...] *The Arabian Nights* is plural and mercurial" (2-3). It is this resistant "mercurial" orality that challenges the fixation of written representations and stories - and in the case of diasporic narratives identities - which distinguish Farah's and Zayid's one woman show and stand-up routines as Sheherazadian narratives. Performance of Sheherazadian narrative then represents an example of how twenty-first century experiences of Arab-American women are encoded in performance in a dramatic format which, as *The Nights* sought, effects change through demonstration. Accordingly, in these transmutational qualities lie the activist and political dissenting characteristics of Sheherazadian narrative, as enacted in Farah's one woman show and Zayid's stand-up comedy routine. I must point out, however, that as much as orality forms an integral part of performance, it does not represent the whole mode which also includes technical aspects, such as full bodily gestures, lighting, and setting. Arguably, then, Sheherazadian orality simultaneously returns to the roots of Sheherzadian storytelling while complicating it, by yielding it embodied and written on and through diasporic bodies.

Before dealing with these questions in detail, it would be expedient first to consider the relation between performance, race, and representation as key terms shaping the arguments in this chapter. Performance in this chapter does not function merely on the metaphorical and ideological level in relation to a performance of nation that constantly self-examines the basis of its affiliations and definitions, but rather also; on the actual

personal level as these Arab-American women perform the limits and parameters of their identities weaving those boundaries into an understanding of affiliation to nation. These performances both relate in some form or another to the historical context of the current War in Iraq (2003) and the 9/11 tragedy. Critics like Darcy Zabel stress that there is an urgent need in Arab-American studies to develop a wider more varied understanding of what it means to be of Arab descent and live in the United States during such moments of crisis. (*Arabs in the Americas* 1-2).

Arab-American studies should hence involve a study of how people of Arab-American affiliations negotiate the self in the diaspora and how the hyphen in hyphenated identities becomes either a bridge or a gap or concurrently both in relation to particular historical and political contexts. When the United States is at war in the Middle East, analyses of the complexities shaping Arab-American identity become all the more important because of the contested nature of ascribing to a supposedly dangerous Muslim or Arab identity, which places these Arab-Americans in the position of the enemy within. Representation takes precedence, as these women blur the boundaries of what it is to be an Arab and a Muslim through resistance to the gendered stereotype of the submissive, oppressed Arab and Muslim woman. By calling attention to the strong relationship between dominant stereotypical racializations of Arabs and these women's resistant representations, my aim is to explore performance as a space for struggle over representation which these Arab-American women performers seek to expand beyond the mere limits of positive and negative images. African-American critics discuss the problematics of representation in a context which I believe also applies to Arab-Americans: "the issue of race and representation is not just a question of critiquing the

status quo. It is also about transforming the image, creating alternatives, asking ourselves questions about what types of images subvert, pose critical alternatives, and transform our worldviews [...] Making a space for the transgressive image [...] And even then little progress is made if we transform images without shifting paradigms" (hooks, *Black Looks* 4).

Performance as a genre is particularly well suited to investigating the politics of Arab-American representation as opposed to poetry and the novel because performance art allows women "to insert their subjectivities into a representational apparatus" underlined by the idea that the body can be "a material and representational site at which ideology might be rewritten" (Dolan, "Intro" 3-4). Accordingly, performance becomes an ideal site to resist, rewrite, and renegotiate the parameters and limits of Arab-American identities in the wake of the War on Terror. One of the difficulties facing a study of performance is that it is a live, direct mode of communication between a performer and an audience.[45] Laila Farah's one-woman show *Living in the Hyphen-Nation* (2000-2005) is accessible in the anthology *Talking Back and Acting Out: Women Negotiating the Media Across Cultures*. Not much extensive research has been done so far on Arab-American women's performances. Laila Farah has written about her own performative experiences, but Maysoon Zayid's performances have not been studied within a scholarly context. Furthermore, each one of these performances entails a different social context which is further riddled by my inability to analyze them as an actual audience member, in order to figure the group dynamics involved in how an audience positions itself in relation to such

[45] Maysoon Zayid's Stand-up routine at the 2006 *Arab-American Comedy Tour* is accessible on DVD.

performed representations. My analytical strategy then will be to place myself as an intermediary between the audience and the performer, shuttling between these two positions with the aim of gleaning the distinguishing performative aspects of Sheherazadian orality when performed on stage.

Through this, I hope to examine what some critics consider to be the performance paradigm which "takes as both its subject and method the experiencing body situated in time, place, and history" (Conquerwood 3). Moreover, these performers invite us through their oral performances to consider the relationship between textuality and orality as different means of figuring cultural and racial identities within the Arab-American diasporic context. Sheherazadian orality challenges the notion that Arab-American women's experience can only have meaning textually, opening up the space for more public, direct modes of representation such as performance. Elizabeth Fine and Jean Haskell Speer argue,

> [T]he power of performance to create, store, and transmit identity and culture lies in its reflexive nature [...] performative reflexivity is a condition in which 'a sociocultural group, or its most perceptive members acting representatively, turn, bend, or reflect back upon themselves upon the relations, actions, symbols, meaning, codes, roles, statuses, social structures, ethical and legal rules, and other sociocultural components which make up their public selves'. (Introduction, 8)

In this argument, like Stuart Hall and Anthony Appiah, Fine and Speer argue for a conception of identity which does not revert to essentialist politics, but rather bases itself upon "articulation," performance and strategic positionality, which all suggest a more

dynamic understanding of identity. Such an understanding of identity involves a transformation of reductive representations, with the aim of changing perspectives. Arab-American women's performance of the Sheherazadian narrative adopts and encourages a performative reflexivity, through which "sociocultural components" are reconsidered and rethought. Arab-American performers like Farah and Zayid contest Orientalist translational processes, by drawing attention to the White hegemonic processes that frame them as either oppressed and silent or exotic. The two performers in this chapter, with varying degrees, reflect upon their cultural identity and perform and constitute their identification processes, remolding reductive essentialist representations of themselves and their cultures. Accordingly, what recurs in these women's performances of a Sheherazadian narrative is the embodied experience of Arab-American/Muslim women's relation to the U.S. as a result of the ongoing war in Iraq, crossing actual and perceptual borders and 9/11. These are all critical experiences which shape why and how these women seek to negotiate their cultural identities.

Laila Farah's one woman show is divided into three sections: "Pearls and Pastels,""Sheherazade Don't Need No Visa," "Stars and Stripes Forever."[46] These sections trace movement across actual and conceptual borders both in the U.S. and

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[46] "Adolescence in 'Absentia,'" and "Resisting Arrest: Arresting Resistance"are two new sections of this performance which appear in Farah's article "Dancing on the Hyphen." Farah clarifies that "Stars and Stripes" and "Adolescence in 'Absentia'" had remained in the metamorphosis of the show that she had been touring for five years up to 2005. This metamorphosis which the performance undergoes is reminiscent of the original malleability of Sheherazade's original oral storytelling.

Lebanon. "Pearls and Pastels" explores how Laila's mother's interest in fashion and elegance was an attempt at organizing her chaotic life resulting from civil war. "Sheherazade Don't Need No Visa" investigates a sequence of actual and virtual checkpoints and roadblocks in both Lebanon and the U.S., which Farah must negotiate herself through. The checkpoints she runs into in Lebanon are ones during her forced evacuation in 1984, while the roadblocks in the U.S. are created by the exoticism shaping Arab women's representations. In "Stars and Stripes Forever: Sheherazade's Sequel," Farah records institutional violence practiced by the Federal Aviation Administration against Arabs and Arab-Americans entering the United States through documented experiences. "Adolescence in Absentia" concentrates on Farah's teenage years in Lebanon during the Lebanese civil war and the Israeli invasion of Beirut. The last piece, "Resisting Arrest: Arresting Resistance," accounts her experience of being forced to watch human rights abuses committed by U.S. soldiers in Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. Throughout, the hyphen in these performances becomes a space for exploring the complexities and contradictions of diasporic experience.

Zayid's stand-up comedy routine begins with her declaration that she is a "Palestinian-Muslim virgin with cerebral palsy from New Jersey." Throughout her act, she challenges borders as she jokes about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, her attempts at marrying a Palestinian and bringing him to the U.S., her Palestinian father who resembles Sadam Hussein, her experiences in airports, her cerebral palsy and the time she spends in Gaza helping Palestinian children. Through jokes and witty comments about the discrepancies of being Arab and American in our contemporary historical and political context, Zayid assumes agency and undermines the stereotype of the silent, oppressed,

Arab-Muslim woman.With Zayid's stand-up comedy routine, the direct references to Sheherazade are further diminished as Zayid shapes orality as the vital aspect of her resistant diasporic discourse. Through Orientalism, the Arab and Eastern woman has often been associated with silence and passivity, with the odalisque figures of nineteenth century paintings and the "bundles in black" images of Hollywood cinema. Zayid's resistance to these stereotypes, through stand-up comedy represents an innovative and highly accessible form of expression, which increases the activist possibilities for Arab-American diaspora women performers because of its introduction of laughter. In this sense, the stereotype is undermined since Sheherazade - who does not have to refer to herself as Sheherazade any longer, breaking the paradigm and yet still reviving an empowering oral storytelling - is not only talking on stage and challenging stereotypes of silence, but she is also laughing and laughing quite loudly at that. Moreover, she is empowered also to drive others to laugh at themselves and their preconceptions.

Laughter, as a tool of resistance, becomes the Arab-American woman performer's mirror, through which the need for a performative understanding of nation is reflected. In a way, laughter in Zayid's routine functions similar to Margaret Cho's stand-up routine *I'm the One that I Want*, where Cho disrupts racial civility through delivering her humour in a manner that shocks her audience out of "the automatism of politeness" (Lee 125). By calling attention to her supposedly Arab features Zayid like Cho "reminds her audience [...] of the fantasy-work regarding firm boundaries between self and other, subject and abject [...] that are upheld by racial stereotyping" (Lee 118). In this manner, by essentializing race through humour, they draw attention to its cultural constructedness. However, despite an acknowledgement of its constructedness these women refuse to have

their race excised, alienated, and abjected from their bodies in their attempts to magnify how whiteness through its liberal naive pretense erases the reality of racism (Lee 121). In this counter- move, they essentialize racism and how it functions, instead of essentializing race.

Laila Farah and *Hyphen-Nation*

Farah designates the activist aims of her performance to be driven by an attempt on her behalf to describe her negotiation of several borders in the Middle East, the United States, and back to Lebanon "to avoid the normative polemical representation of the Islamic oppressed woman, and her conflation with the backward, subjugated woman, the victimized, exoticized harem girl, and the ignorant and illiterate wailing woman" (*Living in the Hyphen-Nation* 180). Identity in Farah's words here cannot be easily represented in one image or even through situating it in one geographical location, but can only be understood in flux and at various borders and check-points. To convey her particular Arab-American experience, she needs to chart a series of movements across actual and perceptual borders, highlighting in the process how diasporic narrative is a narrative of fluctuations. In this, she foregrounds encounters as a viable space for theorizing positional identities. Many cultural studies theorists designate the importance of analyzing encounter and movement across borders which must be sufficiently historicized to avoid fetishism.[47] She shapes the Sheherazadian narrative with its power and gender politics into her own diasporic personal narrative, re-encoding Sheherazade's history of resistant

[47] See Sara Ahmed's discussion of encounters in her introduction to *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (1-17).

connotations in Arab women's writing by invoking her in the last two sections of her performance. Farah's concern with border crossings and their potential for overcoming dominant-culture stereotypes echoes the concerns of other performance artists like Guillermo Gomez-Pena, the Latino-American performance border artist.[48]Gomez-Pena like Farah experiences the same contested relation to borders because of his inferior status as a Mexican immigrant alienated him in the U.S., while in Mexico he was considered a Chicano because he lived on the other side. Kawash designates the aims of the "border artist's" project to be "redefinition, which conceives of the border not only as the limits of the two countries, but as a cardinal intersection of many realities [...] a place where the so-called otherness yields, becomes us, and therefore becomes comprehensible" (Kawash 47).

On the level of power politics the audience is in a sense her Shahriyar, since she is directing her performative storytelling to them, in an attempt at changing ideological conceptions by drawing attention to the constructed cultural and political borders that separate her as an Arab-American from them. Through the orality of Sheherazade, she assumes power on the stage as she makes her performance a space for interrogating framed representations of Arab-Americans and Arab-American women, though her relationship to them is not governed by the exact same power dynamics; after all, there is no actual sword held above her head if she fails to engross them through her performance. However, there is still urgency in her need to tell her story to her audience. Farah

[48] "Born and raised in Mexico City, Gomez-Pena came to the U.S. in the late 1970s to pursue his artistic interests [...] On that occasion, crossing the border triggered an identity crisis and creative process which has sustained him to the present day" (Cummings 50).

designates the urgency in storytelling to be inherent in the need to create "a public space in a form contrary to that of the dominant discourse, to de-marginalize and empower all at once" ("Dancing" 329). By questioning margins, the permeability of borders is uncovered by the changing of masks during the performance as well as the switching of papers. In one section, Farah discusses the permeability of race as she is questioned regarding her racial ethnicity at the U.S./Mexican borders:

> As white? *(change mask)* switch papers/codes/languages – *(slap papers open)*We are at the Mexican/U.S. border in San Diego with two white friends in the front and Margarita and I sitting in the back and then, "Are you sure you are all U.S. citizens?" [...] You two have accents, where are you from? And we show our U.S. passports and seconds later he waves us through his shame. ("Dancing" 323)

Accordingly, the audience is directed to consider the intersections of these different identity positions and experience the "curing" aspect of Sheherazadian orality as experienced by Shahriyar in the original frame tale. Again by using the word "cure" here I am not advocating a simplistic one-to-one relationship between performer and audience leading to instantaneous activism and change. In this a lesson is to be learned from Sheherazade's continual storytelling process. Rather, I seek to draw attention to the possible activist potentialities, which Sheherazadian orality offers, as a result of providing a space for listening to stories from the margins. However, as a Lebanese-American, Farah addresses a very particular diasporic positionality that needs to be contextualized.

Lebanese-Americans represent one of the largest sub-groups within the Arab-American diaspora. As a country, Lebanon has struggled under French colonialism, civil strife, and war with Israel as well as political tension with Syria. It has a heterogeneous

society composed of many ethnic, religious, and kinship groups. Ethnically the Lebanese are divided into Phoenician, Greek, Armenian, Arab, and Kurdish elements. The first wave of Lebanese immigration was between 1881 and 1925. The second wave of Lebanese immigration took place after the Arab-Israeli war in 1967, when 13,000 Lebanese came to the U.S. Between 1975 and 2002 when civil strife between the various ethnic groups broke out, around 46,000 Lebanese arrived in the United States. Lebanese Americans worked hard to combat negative images of and discrimination against all Arab peoples. In 1980, two Lebanese Americans, former U.S. Senator James Abourezk and professor of political science James Zogby, established the American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC). By the 2000s the ADC was the largest Arab American organization in the United States.[49] Farah, in her performance, points to these historical and political contexts in the section entitled "Sheherazade Don't Need No Visa" when she negotiates her way across checkpoints with a Muslim Syrian soldier who begins to touch her threateningly and a Christian soldier from Southern Lebanon who expresses his mistrust of her because he suspects she has been collaborating with Muslims. Moreover, she narrates her shock at having to be evacuated from Beirut in 1984, because of the ongoing political factions and the 1983 bombings of a U.S. Marine Barracks as well as the United States Embassy.

The president of Lebanon, Amine Gemayal, contacted President Reagan at the time denouncing this violent attack. This incident is an example of the warring factions

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[49] Most of this historical information on Lebanon and Lebanese immigration to the U.S. is from *Britannica Online* "Lebanon," *Answers.com* "Lebanese-American" and William Cleveland's *A History of the Modern Middle East.*

within Lebanon each functioning according to their own agendas. Farah describes her experience of this divided nature of her homeland as heart-wrenching. After this instance of violence, she discovers that Lebanon is also not home. This is why when the U.S. marine tries to appease her by telling her she will be home soon, she describes her mixed feelings saying, "[b]ut there is no relief on my face, only the bile rising, a searing pain silent behind shadowed eyes. I thought I was home" (*Living* 190). In these checkpoint incidents she performs how home can only be narrated through motion and encounter and not really by an attachment to a particular space. She reaches this realization of the permeability of the idea of home, while simultaneously losing her home.

Farah explains that diasporic subjects intentionally complicate their identification processes in performance, with the aim of redefining them. This is why in "Sheherazade Don't Need No Visa" Farah concentrates upon performing her hyphenated experience at several actual and cultural borders. The problematics of cultural translation are foregrounded, as Farah considers the translation of "ululation." She explores the cultural nuances lost in translation, by drawing the contrasts between the dictionary's definition of "ululation" and Arab women's performance and interpretation of "ululations," which are a celebratory expression and not a war cry as defined by the dictionary. In questioning processes and practices of cultural translation, Farah calls attention to the limitations which predetermine representation. As a result of this, she embarks upon exploring the many bodies we inhabit and questions simplistic accounts, which seek to frame the nuanced and complicated meanings of clothes as one example of an external marker of identity; "What is the visa required to move in and out of the bodies of the self? A signifier? A stamp [...]?" (*Living* 188).

Questioning Categories: Unveiling Stereotypes and Dressing Up

In the second part of the performance, "Sheherazade Don't Need No Visa," an unveiling of misconceptions of Western reductionist representations of the mythic Muslim woman takes place. The headscarf hence becomes a central prop in this section. One never senses that it is the veil of oppression so commonly used in the media's ready-made propaganda kit, but it rather becomes a tool of deconstructing Western misconceptions of Muslim and Arab women. The stage directions for this section begin by Laila performing a seductive dance and then angrily ripping off her veil as an expression of her frustration with an immigration officer questioning her regarding her identity. In this action, we can trace how the veil works to stabilize and destabilize identity, complicating prevalent reductive interpretations of its relation to Muslim women's freedom. The unveiling in this instance is not staged as an act of liberation, but rather as an act of desperation. Throughout this section, Laila questions how the veil as a signal of alien-ness functions in the diasporic context. She questions the reductive nature of arguments that the real woman lies hidden somewhere behind the veil waiting to be liberated; "when a woman unveils...tongues start wagging...Which part of your tongue do I need to chop off? How do you know who I really am?" (*Living* 188).

She then moves on to manipulate the veil to enact stereotypical representations deconstructing all the prevalent roles assigned to this article of dress: "the erotic-exotic harem girl the downtrodden peasant, veiled, illiterate, miserable, squatting in the field the Intifada woman throwing rocks in the street or Hanan Ashrawi paying homage at a religious site" (*Living* 188). Through these various stereotypes, she simultaneously constructs and deconstructs the tools of translation used to frame Arab women. Unveiling

for her is not the Muslim woman's unveiling, but rather an unveiling of colonialist frameworks that shape fetishized representations of Arab women; "So this is an unveiling of colonizing frameworks...This is an unveiling of different ways of being and of representing that being...This constant switching of papers, codes, and languages creates whole new forms of epistemic knowledges [...] so Sheherazade may or may not have a veil [...] and she stops at no borders but those of her own creation" (*Living* 190). Accordingly, the title of this section "Sheherazade needs no visa" becomes particularly significant as Sheherazadian orality becomes a means of crossing boundaries in the diasporic context. Sheherazade, as Susan Gauch argues, has always been associated with cultural and social boundary crossing; however, in Farah's hands this boundary crossing is performed in front of us as she negotiates the various affiliations that construe her identity.

In "Pearls and Pastels" we are introduced to yet another facet of Laila's identificational positionality, her English mother. By drawing attention to Linda, Laila's mother attempts to practice control over her life in war-torn Lebanon. In "Pearls and Pastels," Farah portrays, through her mother's obsession with fashion and elegance, an attempt at organizing the chaotic life surrounding her. This section details the ritualistic steps of beautification imposed upon Laila by her Nordic Anglo-Saxon mother, Linda. By contrasting her mother's "Pearls and Pastels" existence with Lebanese life, Laila realizes "[a]lthough Linda's traditional values of propriety, obedience and filial duty certainly crossed over into the larger social milieu's expectations [...] the juxtapositions of the two life worlds just didn't jive" (*Living* 186). However, Linda's obsession with ritual and order is gradually discovered to be her personal attempt at surviving the chaotic disorder

and disarray of war. In a sense, her "Pearls and Pastels" existence stands at odds with the sectarian division of a war-torn Lebanon leaving her daughter Laila divided between these two worlds; "The subtle nuances of her controlled and ordered world clashed with the cacophony and chaos of the Lebanese world we lived in, rendering me permanently, as Edward Said says, 'out of place'" (*Living* 185). Defiance of her mother's mode of living is expressed by Laila's refusal to wear the pearls and their substitution by "a long black abbeyah and black scarf" (*Living* 187). Throughout this section we witness Linda's attempts to inscribe upon her daughter the codes of the "perfect feminine girl" through daily training lessons (*Living* 183). The mirror as a prop device becomes essential and is centered upon the stage to foreground this centrality assorted before it "all the things it took to embody 'ladyness'" (*Living* 184).

In the last section of the performance "Stars and Stripes Forever: Sheherazade's Sequel," she further questions the viability of categories by drawing attention to the multiaxial identifications simplified through such categorizations, "the lines that separate the types, the categories, the stereotypes, the real, the unreal, the surreal, the hyper-real, the real flesh-and-blood human types that attempt to enter this fine multicultural nation" (*Living* 191). She discusses the precarious position of her American identity and how borders and travel are charged spaces and times where presumptions about race become imminent. Throughout this section she criticizes the FAA policy according to which all persons with Arab-sounding names, travelling back into the United States on American carriers are interrogated because "only names such as your own could ever be chosen above the rest ... yours and others that sound like Farah, Abdulrahman, and Shebadezeh" (*Living* 192). In this, she questions the basis of racial profiling in airports. Accordingly,

the airport becomes a space where Arab-Americans intensely sense the tension between the cultures they straddle. A place where the limits of citizenship are revealed as an experience of alienation weaves itself into their visas, residencies, citizenship, and their national anthem; "One citizen alien, one resident alien, one visa-ed alien [...] your very own private anthem... the now alien anthem of stars and stripes forever" (*Living* 192). In a sense, then, this is Farah's testimony to being alienated from her American identifications.

Sheherazade's Stand-up Routine

The fact that she performs a stand-up comedy routine is not unique in Arabic culture by any means, since Arab women comedians have been acting and performing comic monologues in Arab cinema and theatre since the 1940s. Moreover, around sixteen Arab-American women performers performed in the Sixth Annual Arab-American Comedy Festival in 2009.[50] In American culture, stand-up has its historical roots in vaudeville, burlesque, and variety theatre. African-American stand-up has its antecedents in the African griot figure, slave humour, and trickster tales.[51] The resistant orality of the stand-up routine can be interpreted as a continuation of "grandmother storytelling" processes which depend upon retrieval, recoding, and regeneration (Minh-ha 125). Though Zayid makes no direct references to Sheherazade's frame tale of *The Nights*, her performative resistant storytelling is a revival of Sheherazade's subversive storytelling.

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[50] See Website of the Annual Arab-American Comedy Festival <http://www.arabcomedy.org/>.

[51] For further discussion of Stand-up in American culture see David Bushman's *Standup Comedians on Television*.

Through stand-up Arab-Muslim-American women's cultural translation takes on the form of disruptive abjection. This abjection works similarly in Margaret Cho's performances. As an Asian-American stand-up comedian, Cho bases her comedy on abjection through holding up something unwanted (Lee 113). In Cho's case, this is by calling attention to Asian racial stereotypes, such as jokes about yellowface and "martial arts mystique" (118). With Zayid, however, what is held up is the racial profiling and stereotypes that have become a part of Arab-American men's and women's lives, particularly after the tragic events of 9/11. What is foregrounded by Zayid is the fear, resulting from the war on terror which has lead to the need to manage Arab bodies. Abjection works through Zayid trying to alienate and excise herself from this profiling and terror projected upon Arab-American bodies. It also works through the attempts of racial propriety's and civility's attempts at weaving such encroachments upon civil liberties within the context of national security. This opens up the possibility for studying stand-up as a means for reflecting upon the performativity of Arab-American and particularly Palestinian-American diasporic communities, and how this mode of performance provides space for agency and dissent to dominant racial discourse about Arab-Americans and Arab-American women in particular. Accordingly, Zayid's stand-up routine assumes the role of diasporic Sheherazadian narrative, by seeking to uncover the racialized discursive practices shaping translations of Arab women in the hegemonic, cultural imaginary. As a resistant Arab-American woman's performance, Zayid's stand-up comedy challenges a very specific stereotype of Arab women as passive and silent, due to the very public and open nature of this mode of performance. Similar to Laila Farah's one woman show, Zayid's routine is an example of an oral diasporic narrative which discusses the racial and gender

stereotypes framing Arab-American women's representations. In this sense, though it does not directly refer to Sheherazade, it enacts the subversive orality, so characteristic of Sheherazade.

However, stand-up comedy both in the East and West is interpreted by some as a very masculine performative art governed by an aggressive and dominating attitude of control over the audience (Auslander 111). This understanding of stand-up comedy decreases its potential of being interpreted as a liberating cultural and feminist narrative of resistance. Such arguments for the masculinity of stand-up comedy as a performative art are rather essentialist since they miss the fact that "[s]tand-up is an intimate part of the feminism each woman lives" because of its interpretation in relation to subversive resistance to inequalities and survival (Fraiberg 316). Accordingly, women's jokes and witty remarks about the inequalities they face and how they survive them are examples of active behaviours that express agency. Despite the fact that laughing and smiling are the more passive social responses expected by women and stand-up comedian genre is considered, form-wise, as intrinsically male-centred, stressing the importance of control and domination over the audience, there is still a subversive power within female humour which empowers and centers their experiences. Though it would seem that comedy does not come to mind as the first topic that a feminist analysis should engage in because of "the social and cultural inequities experienced by members of diverse groups and populations" in reality it is actually, very much a space for feminist engagement (Fraiberg 317). It is through comedy that many women stand-up comedians manage very blatantly to discuss issues of racism and sexism. This is why "[f]eminist critics who study women's comedy in general have emphasized its subversive potential," which is located in stand-

up comedy's ability to subvert dominant ideology while reflecting it (Fraiberg 319). Through these dual techniques of reflection and subversion, Arab-American stand-up comedians like Maysoon Zayid manage to negotiate racial and cultural affiliations and subvert prevalent stereotypes and race-thinking structures. This negotiation and subversion are driven by the activist nature of diasporic Sheherazadian narrative, which through the comic nature of the stand-up routine holds a magnifying mirror to reductive media cultural constructs of the "Arab" half of their identity, carving out in the process performative Arab-American identity positions.

Laughter and Resistance: Zayid's Sheherazadian Orality

In exploring Zayid's stand-up routine, in relation to Sheherazadian narrative and its orality, the dynamics shaping Arab-American women's diasporic narratives develop further. Zayid, the Palestinian-American Stand- up comedian, describes herself at the beginning of her stand-up routine as "A Palestinian Muslim virgin with cerebral palsy." In this one line, she basically summarizes the different positioned identities according to which her oral Sheherazadian narrative will be shaped in her performance, as she carries out her storytelling in the form of anecdotes, narrative jokes, one-liners, and short descriptive monologues. Through her introduction of herself on stage, we are invited to believe that her personality and stage persona are one and the same, which encourages us to frame her routine as a form of political activism against race thinking paradigms and racism as she weaves negotiations of her various identity positions as an Arab, a Palestinian and an American living between the U.S. and Palestine. In an online interview

with Emma Kat Richardson, Zayid intentionally points publicly to claiming a Muslim identity position as a political act:

> I felt like I had to talk about being Muslim, because we're so inundated with these ridiculous, stereotypical images of Islam on television. And quite often, even in entertainment, the images of women in Islam are ludicrous. So I was like okay, I'm a Muslim woman and I'm very spiritual and proud of who I am and who my family is and where I come from, so let me talk about it so that people can see that Islam has different faces. ("Maysoon Zayid: Comedian without Borders")

Stand-up comedy is the genre of the racial outcast. Other, under-represented/over-represented groups such as African Americans and Jews have used this format successfully to question stereotypes and open up the heterogeneity of race in the United States. As an artistic mode of expression, stand-up comedy releases tension by directly facing social and racial problems; it creates a community of like-minded people by people sharing attitudes in laughter and is a relatively cheap and accessible form of entertainment. Moreover, it has been political since its inception. Maysoon Zayid is amongst a new group of rising Arab-American stand-up comedians like Ahmed Ahmed and Dean Obeidallah who are using stand-up comedy as a means to undermine cultural and racial tensions currently experienced particularly by Arab-Americans in a post 9/11 era.[52] As a highly popular, accessible, and attractive form of social protest and activism,

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[52] Carol Fadda-Conrey argues that "'moments of [national] crisis' that serve to position Arab-Americans under an interrogative and suspicious light (especially after September 11) further

stand-up resists the predominance of race-thinking paradigms, which are increasingly becoming the central force shaping the laws and legal processes influencing how Arab and Muslim-American communities in the diaspora are represented. Scholars argue that the Bush administration's dominant understanding of the social landscape of the "war on terror" is determined by "the narrative scaffold for the making of an empire dominated by the United States [...] Supplying the governing logic of several laws and legal processes, both in North America and in Europe, [which] underwrites the expulsion of Muslims from political community, a casting out that takes the form of stigmatization, surveillance, incarceration, abandonment, torture" (Razack 5). The Arab-American stand-up comedians mentioned above are resisting these attempts at "expulsion" and "casting out" by exploring the intersections of their various identity positions in their comic routines.

However, before going into the details of Zayid's comic routine it is important to understand the diasporic position from which she speaks. As a Palestinian-American, Zayid's relation to Palestine is shaped by the exile which she and many other Palestinians experience. Due to this notion of exile which resulted from the 1948 war between Arabs and Israel and led to the creation of the state of Israel as well as the second exodus in 1967, many critics argue that the use of the term diaspora as applied to Palestinians suggests a "potential acceptance of the Palestinian dispersal" (Lindholm-Schulz and Hammer 21). Palestinians currently living in Gaza and the West Bank who had to leave other cities in Palestine have experienced a form of internal displacement as well which

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conceal the complex makeup of this diverse group from the public eye by reducing it to a handful of negative stereotypes" ("Arab-American literature" 190).

makes diaspora a rather contentious term within the Palestinian context. Accordingly, the term diaspora tends to have dubious connotations for Palestinians whose lives are defined by the "diasporic condition." Schulz and Hammer point out that "displacement, dispersal, forced movement and constraints on movement have a much wider significance. [T]he predicament of alienation from land, territory, place defines the lives of most Palestinians" (22).

The greatest number of Palestinian refugees to leave Palestine was during the 1947-1948 war when around 700,000 people fled or were expelled as a result of the creation of Israel. Refugees were not allowed to return to Israel after the war, hence instigating their exile situation (Lindholm-Schulz and Hammer 24-33). While some Palestinians arrived in America as refugees from the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, the largest number immigrated after 1965, mostly from the West Bank and Jerusalem. Statistics on Palestinian immigration are difficult to confirm given the multiplicity of travel documents and countries of last residence on which data depends.[53]

Maysoon Zayid immigrated with her parents to New Jersey from Palestine and performs her stand-up act about being Arab-American and Palestinian-American both in the United States and in Palestine. Her comedy only forms a part of her activism; she founded Maysoon's Kids in April 2001 to address the needs of the growing population of disabled children in Palestine during the second Intifada. For three months a year

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[53] These statistics on Palestinian-American immigration are from the *Arab American Institute* website "Issues Palestine" <http://www.aaiusa.org/issues/2550/population-estimates-of-americans-of-palestinian-ancestry>.

Maysoon personally goes to 11 different Palestinian refugee camps and villages.[54] She has performed comedy in well-known New York clubs, including Caroline's, Gotham, and Stand Up NY. Moreover, she has toured her stand-up act in both the USA and abroad. Maysoon was the first comedian to perform stand-up live in Palestine performing in Nazareth, Haifa, Bethlehem, Ramallah, and Jerusalem (*The Electronic Intifada*).[55] Within this context, her resistant Sheherazadian narrative is quite literally transnational and transcultural. Her routine itself brings these various aspects together as she discusses her experiences in Palestine/Israel and the U.S.

Maysoon Zayid becomes particularly interesting within this context because her comic performance as a Muslim, Arab-American woman further opens up the heterogeneity of the Muslim, Arab-American experience under the Bush presidency's political environment of demonization of Arabs and Muslims, directly undermining the common stereotype of the oppressed, silent, Muslim woman who needs to be spoken for. She assumes a position of agency when she designates the political goals behind her comedy. In this sense, she revives the original orality and therapeutic role of the Sheherazadian storytelling scenario, though she does not distinctly mention Sheherazade. Throughout her routine she probes the stereotypes plaguing Arab-Americans bringing the representational dilemmas facing the members of this community to the fore with the aim of healing gaps. This process parallels to some extent Sheherazade's storytelling which is

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[54] See *Maysoon Zayid* website "Introducing Maysoon's Kids" <http://maysoon.com/news/article61.shtml>.

[55] See *The Electronic Intifada* "Maysoon Zayid." <http://electronicintifada.net/v2/article1599.shtml>

also driven by the goal to transform Shahriyar's prejudices. Accordingly, then, one can argue that the activist role of stand-up comedy is deeply imbricated in this goal of transforming the public. Along these lines Zayid's stand-up routine can be interpreted as a Sheherazadian narrative because of the transformations this narrative encourages within the American diasporic context. The power relationship between the storytelling queen trying to save her life and the listening king Shahriyar remain in the stand-up comic routine.

However, the position of the listening king is accommodated by a general American audience, a specific Arab-American community, and within that at times a distinctly Palestinian American constituency as well as a distinctly Arab or Muslim female audience. Consequently, Shahriyar as the hegemonic cannot inhabit one distinct, position. In such a communicative arena, Sheherazade's position is threatened only when laughter ceases breaking the communal transformational experience shared by any of these possible audiences. This is why Zayid's attempt to acknowledge the diverse mini-communal groups within her audience represents awareness on her behalf of the positionalities inherent even within a dominant "Shahriyar-like" position of interpretation. Hegemony despite itself is always inherently fragmented making attempts to deconstruct it all the more complicated. Yet, stand-up comedy, through its interpellation of race-thinking paradigms, directly uncovers racial stereotypes by inviting each member of the audience to laugh at reductive modes of thought and then ponder one's role in propagating these very same race-thinking paradigms.

It is hence interesting that Zayid begins her stand-up routine for the 2006 Arab festival in Seattle by gauging the racial groups in her listening audiences and asking how

many Palestinians there are and how many Lebanese and Iraqis. This deliberate gauging of her audience reveals on her behalf awareness of the improvisational and malleable nature of her storytelling because the audience/King before her is constantly changing. Addition and reordering of narrative material can hence take place similar to the improvisation of the *hakawati*/storyteller that would go around telling *The Nights* tales in coffee-houses in the past. The orality of stand-up as an artistic form returns to the Sheherazadian narrative the immediacy and improvisation originally experienced in oral storytelling. Such gauging also brings to the fore an awareness of the many positionalities that are lumped under the term Arab. It also reveals the malleability of stand-up as a performative Sheherazadian narrative, which can be shaped by the racial and social make-up of the audience. In a sense, then, this particular performance speaks to a very particular Shahriyar-like audience group, who within the context of the Arab-American Festival is probably mostly Arab-American. However, since this performance was also distributed on DVD the possibility of the variation of audiences multiplies.

Within the Arab-American diasporic context, the issue that governs Zayid's routine is the denigration of Arab-Americans and Muslims post 9/11 and under the Bush administration. This is where the several short descriptive monologues about air-ports come in.[56] As a result of the 9/11 World Trade Center bombings, air-ports have become a space where Arab identities in particular are scrutinized for security purposes. Within this particular historical context, Zayid references the airport foregrounding it as the space where Arab-Americans, in a sense discover or rediscover their blackness, experiencing in

[56] It is worthy to point out that the airport joke has become something of a staple in Arab-American stand-up comedy.

the process where the limits of affiliation to the U.S. become all the more evident. This is humorously conveyed in the following section of Zayid's routine:

> When I enter an air-port security sees an Arab. And now you might ask yourself well Maysoon, how do they know you're an Arab because I don't usually wear this (points at a small bandana-scarf on her head). This is just for kicks right now. Well it's because I have the kind of facial hair that no waxing in the world could get rid of [...] Security does not only see an Arab trying to board a plane. They see a shaking Arab trying to board a plane. And they're like "That bitch is nervous." [...] If God forbid the plane I'm on crashes. They're gonna blame me and all my neighbours are gonna get on the news ..."Like yeah we always knew there was something wrong with her. I think she was trying to become one of those virgins in heaven.

In this section of her routine, Maysoon draws attention to how she assumes an intersection of several identity positions which all trouble her affiliation to a U.S. nation, within the "War on terror" context. The airport in this portion of her performance becomes a particularly contested space because it is where narratives of racial profiling come to play, where national boundaries are crossed, and where Arab and Muslim affiliations are reduced to narratives of danger. Moreover, even disability - within this context - becomes a possible dangerous source, as is clear through how Zayid's cerebral palsy is interpreted as a possible source of suspicion. What she seems to be hinting at is that there is no space for imagining an Arab-American disabled identity position yet. Her jokes about her disability and her suffering from cerebral palsy bring in an interesting

twist to her act as she uses her reality to undermine possible perceptions of her as an aggressor in her culture, by undermining such perceptions and calling attention to the aggression that she experiences from able-bodied persons who misinterpret her disability or disabled persons who do not see her as disabled enough. Zayid hence places herself once more on a borderline of possible identity positions to deconstruct them and question their limits, designating how she creates her own limits and parameters in the process as she positions herself in relation to these different axes. Through this humorous deconstruction of how a shaking Arab-American woman can be perceived in an airport or even by her own neighbors who secretly mistrust her, Maysoon questions racial profiling turning its preconceptions about Arab-Americans upside down.

Due to the fact that she constantly draws attention to the intersectionality of identification positions she assumes, Zayid does not worry about being niched as the Muslim female comedian with cerebral palsy. In her interview with Richardson, Zayid points out that people's capacity to relate to her is first and foremost what makes her comedy accessible; "I'm a Jersey girl at heart. So when it comes down to it, I feel like the stuff I do is really relatable. I don't think that when Arabs are no longer in style, I won't be; I think it's because I have so many different facets of my personality whether it's being Muslim or Palestinian or a Jersey girl or disabled or single and in my 30s" (3). In this interview, she points to the danger inherent in ascribing to a single identification position because such a position makes one more prone to commodification, so that being Arab becomes something that can be "in style" or out of style. By reducing ourselves into designated categories and a set of characteristics, even if they are positive, that define what it means to be Arab, we obfuscate our complexity and forward our own

commodification. Moreover, there is a danger in conceiving the racism against Arabs which Zayid discusses in her jokes as a homogenized, socialized position imposed upon people of Arab or Muslim descent especially post 9/11.

Such an interpretation perpetuates an idea that both Arabs and those who interpret them within racist paradigms are all passive victims of socialization, deflecting attention from every person's agency and accountability. Racism is not something that is imposed upon us, but is rather something which it is in our hands to change, and stand-up comedy as an activist form of art can be involved in that change. As bell hooks points out in her discussion of ways to overcome racism against African-Americans, the source of racism's oppression is not "prejudicial feelings" but rather "domination and subjugation" (*Black Looks* 15). Only, by calling attention to how racism functions against Arab-Americans through dominant stereotypical representations which subjugate their very humanity can it be overcome.[57]

Zayid goes on to explore the various parameters of her identity as an American by ironically deconstructing how she is interpreted on the east coast and on the west coast. This is clear in her story of people not knowing what an Arab is in Seattle and how she as an Arab-American ironically found no other context to explain her identity position, but through resorting to terrorism: "In New York everyone knows what an Arab is. In Seattle not everyone knows what an Arab is [...] I had to resort to terrorism to explain it. You know like Iraq, 9/11, [...] Munich Olympics. Does anything ring a bell?"

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[57] It is worthy pointing out that the racialization of Arabs goes back much earlier than this. The American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee was founded in 1980 and has been chronicling and dealing with hate crimes against Arabs since then. See their web-site.< http://www.adc.org/ >

What is ironically humorous here, though in a rather dark sense, is that Zayid clarifies the dehumanization of Arabs as she points out how it has become increasingly difficult to define an Arab without resorting to references to terrorism and violence of some sort. In this example, then, lies the paradox inherent in claiming particular monolithic identity positions which due to the actions of a violent fringe come to define a varied and highly diversified group. Drawing attention to this diversity then becomes the only possible means of overcoming reductive generalizations and interpretations of Arabs.

In a sense, the whole anti-racist philosophy behind Zayid's stand-up routine is summarized in her mall monologue, revealing the irony in her humour, which aligns her stand-up performance with a subversive Sheherazadian narrative. In her routine Zayid says, "I like to screw with my fellow Americans. I like to play with their minds. Sometimes when I'm in the mall, I just call my imaginary children to come to me. I'm like Mohammed, Jihad, Allahu Akbar. Come to mommy [...] Burn your backpacks." Arguably, Zayid's routine through its satirical humour achieves just that goal of "playing with the minds" of her audiences. Through her constant intent to speak the unspeakable and to challenge polite racial correctness, Zayid explores the boundaries of her audience's tolerance towards Arab-Americans and how they fit within an idea of an American identity. She refers to how several names have come to suggest violence despite the various possible meanings they convey and how when these Arabic names are placed together they come to connote unmistakable danger. Mohammed is the name of the Prophet of Islam, Jihad despite its popular interpretation in the West as a vengeful call to violence is translated in Arabic as struggle and is commonly used in Islamic theological texts to refer to any personal struggle which a person undergoes, Allahu

Akbar is a term that is translated as God is Great and is often used as an invocation before any act one wishes to begin and backpacks as we all know are cases used by students to carry books and belongings. However, by the power of reference these terms when strung together as they are in Zayid's narrative have come to convey violence.

Through her satirical humour, Zayid draws attention to the reductive referential power of these terms and the urgent need to question them, opening them up once more to the multiple meanings that they can possibly convey. This is all done in the form of a deceptively superficial stand-up comedy routine. Zayid, however, is aware of the problematics possibly inherent in her choice of comedy as an artistic mode of resistance. She explores the tenuous relationship between a mass-cultural mode of artistic expression like stand-up and resistance, wondering about the possible co-optive role that stand-up could ensue. Stand-up assumes a rather precarious role culturally because it is the art of the social "outcast." This position raises questions regarding the power it can have in changing ideologies, since it is itself an art of the margins. However, its empowerment lies in the way is raises and lays bare the racism and prejudices of audience members, through making racism the butt of the joke. As for the audience members who are part of the Arab-American community, the laughter created through stand-up purges them, creating a sense of shared community and instigating a space for healing. The stand-up comedian hence plays on the borders of pleasure and discomfort, according to the varied feelings she arouses in her audience. The dynamics of this pleasure/discomfort relationship vary in every performance. For example, a joke that is funny one night might not be funny another night, which places pressure on the performer to improvise, change, and remold their routine. In this ability to improvise lies the empowerment of

Sheherazadian orality. Similar to Sheherazade who had to improvise every night telling a new tale and leaving it at an unfinished point in the narrative to keep Shahriyar in suspense, Zayid, as a Muslim-Arab-American woman is empowered through this Sheherazadian orality, which allows her to shift the power dynamics commonly accrued to her as a passive and silent Muslim woman. Orality hence places her in a position of agency, where she is the one in control of the laughter and has the power to improvise to make it continuous.

Sheherazade between the Pen and the Tongue

These women's cultural identifications extend beyond the hyphen in Arab-American and can be understood more along the terms of a complex intersection of affiliations: racial, linguistic, historical, religious, geographical and cultural. In this sense, these Arab-American women performers are involved in imitating as well as constituting cultural identity, thus ascribing a political role for art which Fine and Speer argue takes place when performances "involve poiesis - the art of making, as opposed to simple mimesis, imitation" ("Introduction" 9). These performers' choice of a Sheherazadian orality functions through assuming the empowered orality that Sheherazade represents in Arab culture as well as through the antagonistic recodification of the Sheherazade's tale, as it has been culturally appropriated and translated into popular Western culture. Fine and Speer point out that "one's identity develops in the dialectic between individual and society" ("Introduction" 9). Performance as a space which encourages orality is a venue where outcasts and misunderstood groups can find space to initiate this dialectic process, whereby an Arab-American performer like Zayid engages with an audience to question

prevalent representations of Arab-American women and Arab-Americans in general. These Arab-American women performers are active members in this dialectic with society. Through their re-codification of stereotypes, they unfix stabilized representations of themselves and their cultures. Accordingly, performers like Farah and Zayid, who seek to engage in the recodification of cultural and racial stories, engage in this dialectic through re-appropriating *The Nights* and its Sheherazadian narrative techniques as "[s]tories of self and community" which become a familiar and useful container for their resistance to Orientalism ("Introduction" 9).

Critics designate the role of the counter-majority writer or the writer writing from the margins to be strongly linked to an attempt at un-learning and untangling with the aim of resuming the grandmother's interrupted storytelling (Minh-ha 148). Consequently, storytelling as a mode of feminist thought draws attention to the fact that feminism is not governed by universality, but rather by the particular cultural and historical specificity of reviving and rearticulating grandmothers's tales. The cultural specificity characterizing the Arab-American women performers in this study is created through their attempts to link themselves to storytelling narratives like Sheherazade's and her legacy of orality. Such attempts to revive these cultural storytelling figures and their orality are never far from politics since they ensure a resuming of a tale and its appropriation to a distinct historical and political context of racial tensions, which surround being Arab-American as a result of the United States's current war in Iraq or as a result of the 9/11 tragedy. In a sense, through their revival of this Sheherazadian narrative and its orality, Arab-American women performers articulate voices or perspectives that cannot be silenced; by orally performing their experiences of stereotyping and racism they attempt to negotiate the

seemingly clashing aspects of their identities. However, through the actual live performances of Farah and Zayid and their direct references to the stereotypes and racism that they deal with in their lives, those silences speak. In this manner, the role these performing women play is similar to that of the critic as designated by Edward Said who "is responsible to a degree for articulating those voices dominated, displaced, or silenced by the textuality of texts. Texts are a system of forces institutionalized by the reigning culture at some human cost to its various components" (*The World* 53). According to Edward Said's understanding of the role of the critic as I would like to apply it to the diasporic performer, we can derive how performance for Arab-American women in the diaspora creates agency which can lead to social change. Through their performance of Arab-American women's diasporic "texts," these women can potentially create action through performance.

Sheherazadian orality hence represents a resistance to the possible silences that can be created by textuality. However, this does not suggest that orality is more capable of depicting Arab-American women's experiences because orality remains plagued by an ephemeral quality due to which these "margin-women's" performances often disappear as a result of their being limited to particular audiences and spaces of performance. Moreover, finding, recording, and archiving these performances is a tricky task in and of itself because some of these performances are published only in anthologies like Laila Farah's *Living in the Hyphen-nation*, or are accessible in recorded form like Maysoon Zayid's stand-up routine which was part of 2006 *The Arab-American Comedy Tour* DVD. The relationship between textuality and orality is further revealed to be more complex and less polarized. An analysis of these Arab-American women's performances of the

"worldly text" that is the Sheherazadian narrative in parallel to an interpretation of their performative roles as critics who voice the silences of texts can help us to better understand this further development of the diasporic Sheherazadian narrative.

Accordingly, the main concern of this study becomes an establishment of the "materiality" of the Sheherazadian narrative in relation to a current historical and political context. Edward Said defines this materiality saying "[b]y 'material' [...] I mean the ways, for example, in which [a given] text is a monument, a cultural object sought after, fought after, possessed, rejected, or achieved in time. The text's materiality also includes the range of its authority. Why does a text enjoy currency at one time, recurrence at others, oblivion at others" (*The World* 150). It is within an exploration of this "materiality" that this chapter seeks to explore the materiality of the Sheherazadian orality in performance. The goal behind an exploration of the contemporary recurrence of this narrative in the United States lies in questioning the significance of the revival of this narrative and oral mode of storytelling. Through a study of the construction of a specific diasporic Arab-American women's narrative, within a given historical period, encodings and decodings of culture are revealed as inseparable from the systems of power and dominance that structure society. As part of the "worldliness" of the Sheherazadian narrative, it becomes essential to consider the social and historical context shaping these women's resistance to a commodification of otherness through which as bell hooks argues "ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture" (*Black Looks* 21). However, in relation to a discussion of the commodification of otherness, how politically activist can diasporic performance be? What role does the audience really

perform when the diasporic performance invites political dissent? What are the dialectics between diasporic artistic expression and actual political mobilization?

All in all, whether through one woman shows or stand-up routines, Arab-American women performers, like the Palestinian-American Maysoon Zayid and the Lebanese-American Laila Farah, represent a different stage in the development of the racing of Sheherazade through a foregrounding of orality. In their performances, we are able to physically witness how Sheherazadian orality becomes a space for negotiating affiliations. They enact the gaps and hyphens shaping their cultural identities through an interrogation of representations of race and gender in their performances. Sheherazade's original subversive orality is revived through their artistic endeavours. In this subversive orality which Sheherazade represents in Arabic literature, these diasporic performers give voice to what is sometimes silenced by the textuality of narrative. Race and gender become central issues in this context as these women foreground the problems of being Arab-American within the historical and political context of neo-imperialistic agendas in the Middle East carried out by the past George W. Bush administration. Moreover, they raise key questions with regards to how Arab and Muslim-American women "articulate" a collective identity in the diaspora, while simultaneously keeping the various aspects of their identity distinct so that collective identity is not reduced to essentialism, becoming both "structured and malleable" (Hall, "On Postmodernism and Articulation" 53). Sheherazadian orality, in contrast to Sheherazadian narrative, opens space for experimenting with redefinitions of identity. Through their embodied performances of the many ways of being Arab and the many ways of being American on stage, the hyphen becomes all the more apparent and its role is revealed as being in constant flux, as they

connect and disconnect Arab-American women's identities. Such performances encourage an imagination of new social realities. Moreover, by critiquing and undermining racist stereotypes they question narratives of authenticity, bringing to the fore the complexities of identity in general and the Arab-American identity in particular. Finally, in these performances we see these women's active agencies in countering stereotypes of the silent oppressed Arab and Muslim woman as they attempt to interpret them, subvert and remold them. These self-aware artists then deconstruct the "silent and oppressed" stereotype and other preconceived notions about their race and culture by playing with them and turning them inside out.

Conclusions

In her introduction to *Arabs in the Americas: Interdisciplinary Essays on the Arab Diaspora* (2006), editor Darcy Zabel comments on the nature of post 9/11 studies of the Arab diaspora in America, claiming that they distorted readers' understanding of the Arab presence in America rather than clarifying it, arguing "[I]nstead of advancing scholarship from the general to the specific, many mainstream post-9/11 collections have attempted to justify or simply celebrate the Arab American presence in America, rather than to truly engage in scholarship about specific facets and representations of Arab culture in the Americas, which is, ultimately, the only way to advance the field of Arab American studies" (1-2). It is within this context that this study positions itself, by exploring the racing of Arab-American women and their attempts at resistance.

Right after 9/11, mainstream American media discourses seized the body of the Muslim woman as a "bundle in black" to justify the invasion of Afghanistan. Lila Abu-Lughod points out,

> Plastering neat cultural icons like 'the Muslim woman' over messier historical and political narratives doesn't get you anywhere. What does this substitution accomplish? Why, one has to ask, didn't people rush to ask about Guatemalan women, Vietnamese women (or Buddhist women), Palestinian women, or Bosnian women when trying to understand those conflicts? The problem gets framed as one about another culture or religion, and the blame for the problems in the world placed on Muslim men, now neatly branded as patriarchal. (Lila Abu Lughod Interview)

In this, Abu-Lughod questions the role of general identity categories such as "Arab woman" and "Muslim woman" and how they are manipulated for political purposes. Interestingly enough, this same rhetoric was revived by American right-wing women's groups like the (IWF) the *Independent Women's Fund*, founded by Lynn Cheney, which launched a ten million dollar program to give the Iraqi women the tools they need to run for office. Paula Dobriansky, US undersecretary of state for global affairs, declared that the U.S. government needs to "give Iraqi women the tools, information and experience [...] to run for office and lobby for fair treatment" (Zangana Interview). Ironically, what these programs failed to realize was that Iraqi women have long been the most liberated in the Middle East and were active in public life since the Ottoman Empire. Arguably, then, representations of the "Muslim woman" or "Arab woman" underwent a process of racing through which a variety of identity positions are reduced to a few negative, passive ones. Moreover, these hegemonizing tendencies go a step further by eliding the boundaries between the term "Muslim" and "Arab," so that they can be used interchangeably to convey the same negative characteristics.

Through these discursive constructions, we can discern how hegemonic discourses during times of crisis can create identity change. As a result of the 9/11 crisis, Arab-Americans underwent an identity change due to which they became highly visible. Through hegemonic discourses of patriotism and nationalism, they were gradually drawn out to the limits of citizenship. However, the mainstream discursive constructions that served to race them and shape them as the other, the strange - and in the particular case of Arab and Muslim woman - the passive and oppressed were in place long before 9/11 in the form of Orientalist discourses. Sheherazade's frame tale and its power politics had

always played a central role in Arabic writing and Arab women's writing in particular. In the Arab-American diaspora, Sheherazade's tale was revived in the titles of anthologies such as *Dinarzad's Children: An Anthology of Contemporary Arab American Fiction* (2004) and Susan Muaddi Darraj's *Scheherazade's Legacy: Arab and Arab American Women on Writing* (2004) signalling an appropriation of those power politics in the Arab-American context. Moreover, Arab-American writers and performers have evoked her narrative and orality to challenge prevalent representations of themselves. In this, they enter a race over the representations of Arab and Muslim women, in which they explore the processes of racing.

Racing Sheherazade by ascribing to her a particular racial identity seems on the surface to be a rather unproblematic venture, since Sheherazade is the Storytelling queen of *The Arabian Nights* and is hence Arab. However what does it mean to be Arab? With Sheherazade's migration across the Atlantic, her narrative has undergone transformation, becoming a site of diasporic cultural negotiations, a space for resisting race-thinking paradigms and resurging Orientalisms. She regains her voice and orality through performance. Resisting cultural productions of herself, she becomes a cultural producer, re-imagining herself and her culture across several material modes of cultural production such as food, clothing, fashion, and performance. In re-imagining herself through these various modes of production, she gains agency and interferes in the construction of her representations in mainstream American culture.

However, this interference does not aim to uncover some essentialist identity position according to which Arab-American women can define themselves. It is rather through such metaphors as the *dihliz*, "in-processing" and "articulation" that we realize

that defining an Arab-American women's diasporic position is always through the dynamics between structure and malleability and the pedagogical and the performative. In the end, then, Arab-American women writers and performers are constantly practicing life in the diaspora through negating attempts to fix and freeze themselves into convenient categories. The importance of the hyphen in Arab-American hence foregrounds itself as a connection as well as a limit. To live this hyphen space, one can only dance upon it to figure the intersections of Arab-American experiences. Moreover, both components of the term Arab-American are revealed to be heterogeneous. What does the term Arab convey racially? This term is revealed as particularly fraught, especially with regards to the complex cluster of ethnicities, religions, and biological race markers that it joins under it. The governing metaphorical enterprise of this study's exploration of Orientalist and racial discourses lies in displaying the contention surrounding the designation of a culturally charged literary character's racialized representations and how that shapes Arab-American women's representations.

As a result of this historical and political background, the process of racing Sheherazade and her storytelling is discovered to require a great deal of racing around, pun intended. In choosing to reappropriate Sheherazadian narrative and orality, Arab-American women writers are reviving a collective figure in Arabic literature and teaching her to describe Arab-American women's experiences of identity and race in the diaspora. She has been, for Arab writers in general, a trope for literary creation. For Arab women writers, she has been a proto-feminist storytelling mother figure, through whom they could root their creative attempts. Resistance, creativity, and power politics have hence always been aspects guiding Sheherazade's narrative as a result of the urgency shaping

her storytelling in the original frame tale. Through their writings and performances, these Arab-American artists compete with a conglomeration of Orientalist and stereotypical racial constructions, making their race over representation also a race over race, as they confront and subvert how they are racialized as Arab-American women.

In investigating the revival of Sheherazadian narrative in Arab-American women's writing and Sheherazadian orality in Arab-American women's performance, my aim was to trace the proliferation of Sheherazade across a wide spectrum of forms of cultural production to display the pervasiveness of racing and Orientalist practices shaping representations of Arab women in various modes of cultural production, be they novelistic, poetic or performative. The Sheherazadian narrative, as a creative tool of expression as well as a tool of cultural mediation, is utilized by Arab-American women writers and performers as a space to negotiate the hyphen of their diasporic identities. The overwhelming cultural discourses and representations surrounding Sheherazade and *The Nights*, in popular culture and the media, often fetishize Arabic culture and Arab women, never moving beyond the eternal dumb poses of past odalisques. These women revive Sheherazade and her storytelling techniques in the Arab-American diaspora to unfix the traces of Orientalist and racist discourses which still shape their representations. In this manner, despite the exoticism often associated with Sheherazade, these women recast her narrative and orality to counter the very stereotypes about Arab women often associated with her. Their cultural mediation becomes a form of reinventing their identity positions and clarifying the tug and push forces shaping the limits and parameters of their identity positions. Arguably, then, the artistic output of these women concretizes how writing and

performative arts are subsidiary to other fields of social inquiry, presenting a possibility for effecting change.

At the outset of this study, one of my main goals was to question claims of second wave Western feminists with regards to third world women, in light of Lazreg's third wave feminist critique of first world feminists's racialized representations of third world women's histories. This study sought to reconsider this critique and extend its analysis further to the diasporic context with the aim of questioning prevading second-wave Western feminists' Universalist, decontextualized frameworks. These artists complicate second- wave feminists' analysis because they live in the first world, but the oppression they experience because of their race seems to surpass gender oppression. Moreover, their oppression is rooted in Western liberational discourses which veil Orientalism and institutionalized racism. The revival of Sheherazade in Arab-American women's writing and performance can be regarded as an attempt to revive a protofeminist figure from Arabic culture to resist claims that feminism is necessarily a Western project. Situating Arab-American women's cultural productions in relation to race and diaspora can help in constructing a positioned feminist analysis. Such an analysis seeks to place diasporic women's identities within a fluid context of identifications that challenge the fixities of racing and Orientalism. Similar to the Mesitza, Sheherazade invites an exploration of the limits and parameters of identity.

This current revival of Sheherazade, her storytelling techniques and orality in the United States by Arab-American women writers and performers molds the "Sheherazadian narrative" to the context of the diaspora. In the Arab-American diaspora, this narrative takes on new forms and purposes than those introduced in Arab women

writers's recastings of Sheherazade. In the diaspora, it becomes even more resistant as Orientalist representations and racialized thinking, which portray Arab women as silent, oppressed, and exotic sexual objects of desire, is undermined. These women also question representations of their culture as static. Moreover, they undermine the remaining traces of popular nineteenth-century interpretations of *The Nights*, as an ethnographical document through which representations of the East and Eastern women can be deduced. Contemporary Arab-American women writers and performers reintroduce Sheherazade to resist these prevalent dehumanized representations. They assume the role of cultural mediators and take the responsibility of telling their own story. Shahriyar in their tales is a group of processes revolving around Orientalism, race-thinking and stereotypes, which shape their representations within Western and American culture.

This is why the writings and performances of Arab-American women writers and performers in the diaspora have been shown throughout this study to represent a productive space for a study of the convergences and divergences of feminism(s) and representations. Through their resistant writings and performances, they forged a site of cultural translation, which sought to create a diasporic cultural identity construction that draws on both national and international allegiances; in this context the nation, as well as a collective cultural identity is constantly redefined and narrated. An engagement with the artistic expressions of Arab-American women in the diaspora can hence help us to better understand the complex set of correlatives, according to which difference is constructed within cultural representations and feminism(s).

Consequently, an exploration of Sheherazadian narrative in a diasporic context opens up new spaces for dialogue between feminisms, without framing aspects of third

world women's lives within a limited framework governed by notions of superiority. As a cultural narrative, then, Sheherazadian narrative represents a focal point where disparaging perceptions and representations of Arab-American women's experiences are evoked and challenged simultaneously. Sheherazade becomes an occasion for analyzing "how" images and meanings come to being. Through textual and oral representations of Sheherazadian narrative the constructed boundaries between different forms of narrative were revealed as contentious. In this study, then, this narrative was the occasion for exploring multiple affiliations, feminism(s), cultural representations and the permeable boundaries between textuality and orality, within diasporic women's writings and performances.

In concentrating upon the evolutions that have shaped the Sheherazadian narrative in diasporic women's writing, this study succeeds in contributing to previous studies concentrating upon the figure of Sheherazade and her storytelling legacy. Though previous studies explored aspects of Sheherazade's translation into different cultures, this study is unique in its concentration upon how this narrative is reworked to describe the tensions between nation and diaspora, as well as racialized representations of Arab and Muslim women living in the West. Accordingly, studying Arab women's explorations of their representations in the diaspora, through the reinvention of mainstream Orientalist representations, allows for an acknowledgement of the importance of achieving a dynamics between structure and malleability in figuring diasporic identity positions. My point of focus has been the role of translation and how Sheherazade, as a figure who has been linguistically and culturally translated between the West and Orient, represents a liminal site opened up due to translation. In this sense, the development of the

representations of Sheherazade as a "narrative" in Diana Abu Jaber's *Crescent* to a feminist resistant Muslim woman in Mohja Kahf's *E-Mails from Scheherazad* and finally as a public performer and stand-up comedienne in Farah and Zayid's performances. In each of these reincarnations, Sheherazade represents a component of a diasporic cultural identity position, which seeks to locate diasporic women's identities within a fluid context of identifications. Such a structured malleability, rooted in reviving protofeminist figures like Sheherazade, challenges the fixities of Orientalism. Situating Arab-American women writers and performers in relation to discussions of women's experiences in the diaspora can help to unfix Orientalist fascinations with Arab women. Overcoming such "Orientalist fascination" is one of the goals of reintroducing Sheherazade and Sheherazadian narrative in their diasporic writing. As an artistic exploration of representations, such a narrative seeks to reinvent and recreate stories of homeland. These stories are never simply celebrated because they are always already interwoven, in the case of *The Nights*, with Orientalism and exoticization of the East.

This narrative in contemporary Arab-American women's writing is comprised of many instances of resistance to stereotypical representations of Arab women. The frame tale of *The Nights* with its theme of storytelling as a life saving practice is assumed by these women in an attempt to reshape representations of their lives. Dispersion becomes a governing goal of these women's writings and performances as identities, affiliations, and collective cultural allegiances are explored and questioned. Sheherazade and her narrative strategies become in this context a collective tool revived in order to revive and redefine grandmother figures from the past. Sheherazade's storytelling at the point of a sword becomes a simile for the urgency of exploring why and how figures like Sheherazade are

translated across cultures and how Orientalism shapes such translations. Moreover, with the increasing forces of globalization which are persistently overwhelming every aspect of our lives, resistant representational practices are thrust in a field of translational practices where factors of neo-imperialism, stereotypes, and collective attempts at self-definition all come into play.

In the performances carried out by Arab-American playwrights such as Laila Farah and the stand-up comedian Maysoon Zayid, the Sheherazadian narrative undergoes further developments as the openness and orality of *The Nights* is revived and recontextualized by these performers. Through their various performative techniques these women resist race-thinking paradigms in their society. Orality becomes a central issue in the analysis of the Sheherazadian narrative in these women's performances. By foregrounding orality as a central aspect of the Sheherazadian narrative, these performing women foreground how there is no single knowable truth, but rather multiple narratives which reveal both discursive structures and material life experiences. Moreover, such performative attempts revive the original orality of *The Nights,* which was often told by storytellers as street entertainment; orality challenges essentialist binarisms which situate the oral at the margins and the textual at the centre, through rupturing the binary and refocusing upon orality.

Arguably, then, as the title of this dissertation suggests, Sheherazadian narrative in the contemporary Arab-American diaspora is a narrative of race where Arab-American women writers and performers become very much active members in the racing race. Accordingly, any understanding of how and why Sheherazade is revived in contemporary Arab-American women's writing and performance must engage with a race over

interpretations, through which we discern the dynamics shaping how Arab-American women writers and performers negotiate and translate their multi-affiliations. In this attempt, these women are racing against a long history of Orientalist representations in nineteenth-century English translations of *The Nights* and in mainstream American culture. In racing with Hollywood Sheherazade(s), these writers and performers draw upon a key cultural citation through which their Arab female identity positions have been translated to the West. Instead of negating this stereotypical image, they engage in a dialogue with it to redefine their representations through the very tools of their subjugation. They hence initiate an infinite race of representations where the winner is not the one who reaches the finish line, since there is no such limit or end, but is rather the one who makes the most of this competition by re-appropriating the stereotype and redefining it.

Finally, there has always been a debate amongst scholars regarding the open-ness of *The Nights*. Some stress the closure of *The Nights* by foregrounding the eventual end of the tales through Shahriyar's order to have them relegated to the world of text. These critics usually seek to designate an authoritative version of *The Nights*. Others foreground the malleability and porous nature of Sheherazade's words. I would argue that the charm and power of Sheherazade lie in her ability to make others listen: "[s]imply by making others listen, Shahrazad is able to change the course of government. In the hands of others, her story and stories alternately reinforce boundaries between seemingly separate worlds or break down barriers between cultures" (Gauch 135). Through re-sounding the power of her stories and her voice, Sheherazade speaks the Arab-American experience. In this new geographical context, her narrative and voice take on the tones and cadences

of diaspora. However, the heart of her struggle remains the same; she seeks to make people listen.

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