

**WOMEN WITH STORIES TO TELL:
TRANSACTIONAL INTERACTIONS AND THE OTHER
IN LEILA ABOUZEID'S *THE LAST CHAPTER*
AND LAILA HALABY'S *WEST OF THE JORDAN***

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Abstract

*One of the preconditions for personal growth is self-awareness; that is because real change comes from the heart. If people become aware of their behaviour and their communication patterns, they will be able to modify their lives in a positive direction. When they recognize their problems that need correction and resolve them, they will be able to achieve harmony between the self and the Other. Guided by Eric Berne's theory of Transactional Analysis, this article examines how Leila Abouzeid's *The Last Chapter* and Laila Halaby's *West of the Jordan* pinpoint the social ills of Arab societies in an attempt to effect a measure of healing.*

Keywords: Berne, Transactional Analysis, Arab societies, I/Other

1. Introduction

"Why are some hearts closed? What does it mean when even Arabs close their ears to the wisdom of the Prophet's words? Such people deserve to stew in their own bile" (Abouzeid, 2002a: 8).

Self-awareness usually stimulates personal growth as real change initially comes from within. Recognition of one's deleterious behavioural and communication patterns often promotes people's desire to ameliorate their lives, such desire might be associated with acceptance: acceptance of the self and the Other, and of the intrinsic worth and uniqueness of each. Thus, recognizing problems, resolving them, and holding a sense of acceptance usually prompt harmony between the self and the Other. Leila Abouzeid² and Laila Halaby³ are two female writers who

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² Leila Abouzeid is a Moroccan author. She was born in 1950. She began her career as a radio and TV journalist, and worked as press assistant in government ministries and in the Prime Minister's office. Leila Abouzeid left the press in 1992 to dedicate herself to writing fiction. She is a pioneer among her Moroccan contemporaries in that she writes in Arabic rather than in French and is the first Moroccan woman writer of literature to be translated into English.

³ Laila Halaby was born in Lebanon in 1966 and speaks four languages. She has always tried to balance two worlds, that of her Jordanian father's culture and her upbringing by

recognize some of the social ills of Arab societies and wish to effect a measure of healing between the self and the Other to achieve harmony.

This article employs Eric Berne's theory of Transactional Analysis to examine how Abouzeid and Halaby explore in their novels, *The Last Chapter* (2002) and *West of the Jordan* (2003), the transactional interactions among Arabs. An eclectic approach is also used to pinpoint the correlation between gender and racial oppression as proposed in the novels. Both writers tackle gender and racial problems of Arab societies to prove that the former leads to the latter. The oppression of women is directly proportional to national oppression. Both sexism and racism operate from the same assumption of inferiority-superiority. Sexism is "the belief in the inherent superiority of one sex over all others and thereby the right to dominance." Racism is "the belief in the inherent superiority of one race over all others and thereby the right to dominance" (Lorde, 1998: 631).

In her novel, Abouzeid tells the story of a young woman, Aisha, searching for an identity. This novel reflects the double marginalization of women in Morocco and the clashes of modern and traditional Moroccan societies. On the other hand, Halaby in her work puts both the Middle East and Arab-American communities under investigation. Through the narratives of four cousins, Laila Halaby immerses her readers in the lives, friendships, and love stories of girls struggling with national, ethnic, and gender identities. Mawal lives in the West Bank, cherishing the Palestinian traditions. Hala fluctuates between two worlds: Jordan and Arizona. Khadija, who lives in America, is scared of the freedom of her American friends and of her father's abusive behaviour. Soraya is lost in a foreign yet familiar land.

It is worth noting that Abouzeid, writes in Arabic rather than in French as she is against the language of the colonialist, she sees her first language as giving her a particular connection with her background and as more accessible to the assumed reader. Abouzeid, also, confirms her identity by alluding to Qu'ranic verses and Al Hadith Al Sharif, and to many sayings and proverbs. Unlike Abouzeid who writes first in Arabic then translates her work into English as her "means of communication with the West" (Abouzeid, 2002a: 154), Halaby, as an Arab-American writer, writes in English, thus she addresses a narrower community than that of Abouzeid.

Despite the apparent differences between Abouzeid and Halaby, both writers refuse to be "the guardians [...] of a deadly silence" (Irigaray, 1988: 421). Abouzeid spills out her intention in writing her novel when Aisha, her female hero, says: "I believe

her American mother. Being both an Arab and an American enabled her to speak with both voices and understand both worlds. Her novel *West of the Jordan*, won the PEN Beyond Margins Award and a silver medal for literary fiction from Foreword Magazine. It discusses issues of identity, gender and race.

in self-criticism, for my own good and for the good of my country” (Abouzeid, 2002a: 80). Halaby describes her novel as “a peek into [. . . the Other’s] world” (Halaby, 2003a). She hopes other “people read the book and begin to understand that these [women and Arabs] are people that cry like they do, love like they do” (Halaby, 2003a). Abouzeid and Halaby seem to have but one aim in writing their novels, which is changing the internal structures of their societies and help Arabs and people in general gain “*strokes*” (Berne, 1972: 23). Eric Berne defines strokes “as the recognition one person gives another, as essential for physical and psychological health” (Berne, 1964: vii). These “strokes” enable people to “get out of their script world and into the ‘real’ world, into the role of the Adult who has the mature attitude and takes responsibility” (Berne, 1972: 23). Abouzeid and Halaby desire to make Arabs recognize the necessity of respecting their women and of respecting one another in order to gain the respect of the Other and to be treated as “member[s] of the human race, without restraint” (Berne, 1972: 7). Both writers wish to demolish “all the trash: the things people are doing to each other instead of saying Hello” (Berne, 1972: 4). They also wish to teach Arabs say “Hello rightly [...] to see the other person, to be aware of him as a phenomenon, to happen to him and to be ready for him to happen to you” (Berne, 1972: 3-4). Thus, they aim to revive the crushed and repressed Arab world, whose “intellectuals dedicate themselves to tearing each other apart,” and when they are not doing this, they are engaged in trivial, selfish complaining (Abouzeid, 2002a: 102). The two novelists want Arabs to stop fighting one another and stop making themselves a dehumanized spectacle of entertainment for the white man.

Abouzeid and Halaby target the simplest binary or “two-handed, 'I' and 'You'” transactional positions to help Arabs reach more sophisticated “three-handed” transactional positions of I, You and They (Berne, 1972: 85, 90). The simple “two-handed” transactions between people are divided according to Eric Berne into four positions. The first position is the “I + You + healthy position” of “success” or the “I’m O.K., You’re O.K. life position” (Berne, 1972: 86, 92). The second position is the position of superiority which is the “I + You – position” or the “I’m O.K., You’re not-O.K. life position” (Berne, 1972: 86, 92). The third position is the “I – You + position” of inferiority or the “I’m not-O.K., You’re O.K. life position” (Berne, 1972: 86, 92). The last position is the “I – You –” or the “I’m not-O.K., You’re not-O.K. life position” of futility (Berne, 1972: 87, 92). In investigating the transactions among Arabs, both Abouzeid and Halaby promote the “smooth” proceeding of “complementary” transactions and communications of first position, meanwhile, they help to prevent the occurrence of “broken off” and “crossed transactions” (Berne, 1964: 30). Both writers desire to help Arabs reach the ultimate position of mutual O.K.ness and cooperation. They hope that their novels, though written from the margins, as alleged, might have a transformative effect on the dominant.

Both writers start by disclosing local issues to reach grandiose universal ones. They are conscious that sexism is intimately connected to racism, they thus address the wrongs that Arab women have to endure in their patriarchal societies, then move to articulating the injustices that both Arab women and men suffer at the hands of the colonizer. They draw a similarity between Arab women who have always served as the Other against which Arab males consolidate their power and Arab countries which “serve as the 'other' against which the West has consolidated its cultural and political norms” (Hurd, 2003: 27). Abouzeid and Halaby are conscious that sexism and racism are closely linked together and by confronting sexism, they are able to confront racism.

The writers' choice of dividing the relations of their female heroes into three categories appear to follow Eric Berne's “tripartite division” or “structural Diagram of a Personality” (Berne, 1972: 12). According to Berne each personality is made up of “three ego states [...] called Parent, Adult and Child” (Berne, 1964: 23).⁴ Abouzeid and Halaby are aware that the first experiences a child gains are in family context (Berne, 1972: 159-65). Consequently, they give priority to analyzing and investigating the transactions of their female heroes with the Other family members then with the Other in general; whether a female, a male or a colonizer.

2. Woman vs. Woman

“If woman has an enemy it is other women” (Abouzeid, 2002a: 3).

One of the first “strokes” Leila Abouzeid gives is concerned with the relation between a female and the female Other, in this case between Aisha and her classmate, sarcastically the only “Other” female in a class full of males: “You know, the most insidious plot I've encountered in my life, was carried out against me by a girlfriend at school, the only other girl in the class. She did her best to see that I failed the final exams. If woman has an enemy, it's other women. Even a husband who betrays his wife uses another woman to do it. Some even use their wives' sisters to do it. Is that the sisterhood you talk about?” (Abouzeid, 2002a: 59). Laila Halaby shares Abouzeid's “stroke” and presents a kind of jealousy between women based on colour difference. Latifa, who “is the color of the soil under the peach tree after they have been watered,” is jealous of her sister Hala because she is “lighter” (Halaby, 2003b: 78).

Even when a woman praises another, Abouzeid hints there is a reason behind that. The second narrator in *The Last Chapter* praises Aisha when she sees her on

⁴ The three ego states, Parent, Adult, and Child, will be referred to henceforth as P, A, and C respectively.

television commenting: Aisha's "face [...] glowed like a full moon in the desert night. [...] that's what I call an educated mind [...]. She looks like a queen" (Abouzeid, 2002a: 132). The narrator, as apparent in many occasions, does not really admire Aisha; she envies her. Aisha represents everything she is not, unlike Aisha, she feels inferior and imprisoned within the boundaries of a home and a marital relationship that deny her any sort of communicating with the outside world.

The previous examples ascertain that it is quite impossible to find a successful AA communication between two Arab women. They point that the relations between Arab females are mostly of "I – You + positions" or "I'm not-O.K., You're O.K." positions which are "depressive," destructive (Berne, 1972: 84-86) and reflect a sense of inferiority. The message Abouzeid and Halaby wish to transmit is that jealousy is "a human disease [...]. We'll kill our geniuses with the jealousy in our eyes if we cannot get them with the sword [...]. For God's sake! If we can't succeed ourselves, we can at least let someone else do it" (Abouzeid, 2002a: 130).

Another transactional position between women is the "I + You – position" or "I'm O.K., You're not-O.K." position (Berne, 1972: 86). It is the position epitomized in the following sentence: "Look at her, standing there like a clod of dirt. She's in another world! Always chewing cud like a camel!" (Abouzeid, 2002a: 139). It is the position of superiority mostly carried on by Arab mothers-in-law whose "tyranny" is worse than "the tyranny of France [the colonizer]" (Abouzeid, 2002a: 143). Some mothers-in-law in *The Last Chapter* use magic, though it is forbidden by God, to ensure that their daughters-in-law will always obey them, thereby, guaranteeing that their relation will always remain a PC relation, but not any Parent: an authoritative domineering one. The second narrator in *The Last Chapter* always fulfils all her mother-in-law's orders (even if these orders harm her or her husband) "absent-mindedly, like someone under the effect of a narcotic or hypnosis. No force on earth could stop her from obeying her orders" (Abouzeid, 2002a: 138). Her mother-in-law makes her feel her futility: "I feel like a collapsed building. I feel I don't belong to this life. It's as if I'm in exile. Reality for me is in dreams and hallucination, whether I'm asleep or awake" (Abouzeid, 2002a: 148).

Halaby thinks that, though it is rare, a successful AA transaction can occur between two Arab females, where "(I + You +) maintain universal respect [. . . and] success" (Berne, 1972: 88). Mawal, one of Halaby's female heroes, "is like a clam, only no one will ever get to the pearl, not even with a rock," (Halaby, 2003b: 81). Women trust her, have confidence in her, tell her their secrets and "pour out their troubles" (Halaby, 2003b: 16), knowing for certain that she will never reveal their secrets.

Abouzeid, unlike Halaby, is pessimistic. According to her, the only successful female transaction of an "I + You + position" can occur not between an AA but

between a PC and in this case between a mother (a loving Parent) and her daughter (Child), no matter how old one is, mothers will remain their daughters' best friends. When Aisha thinks of quitting her job because her boss is annoying her, her mother advises her not to, saying: "You're crazy [...]. That's just what he wants you to do. Do you want to help him get what he wants? Do you think getting a job is easy? Look around you. Look at all the unemployment, even among people with degrees. He doesn't own the ministry, he can't hold a position he's not entitled to forever. Just be patient" (Abouzeid, 2002a: 79).

The overall message Abouzeid and Halaby send is that "God made her that way, just the way He made me this way" (Halaby, 2003b: 61), thus, Arab women must have faith in God, accept His will and His Wisdom and must also learn to accept and respect each Other in order to consolidate their identities and perform a successful "I + You +" transaction between female Adults. Abouzeid and Halaby's "stroke" is that sometimes "the acts of women" are "more tyrannical [...] than the men" (Mamdouh, 1998: 65). They wish to encourage the "love for women-sisters. This love is necessary if we [women] are not to remain the servants of the [. . . patriarchal] cult, objects to be used by and exchanged between men, rival objects in the market, the situation in which we have always been placed" (Irigaray, 1988: 422). Abouzeid and Halaby's little optimism towards the existing transactions among Arab women stimulates readers' wonder on the nature of the relations among Arab women and men.

3. Man vs. Woman

[W]e are two distinct species. Our science teacher told us about some research project in which an ant was introduced into an established colony, only to be thrown out. This is what they [men] are doing to us women. And yet we derive strength from their actions and they only weakness, like spoiled children who cannot get what they want. (Abouzeid, 2002a: 2)

Right from the second page of the novel, Abouzeid introduces her "stroke" concerning the type of the relation between an Arab man and a woman, it is of an "I + You – position" or "I'm O.K., You're not-O.K." position. This is the "arrogant position" of "I'm a prince, you're a frog [in this case of course "I" is a man and "You" is a woman]," therefore, I must "get rid of" You (Berne, 1972: 86). Some Arab men commit crimes of domestic violence and abuse their wives just to verify their superior and arrogant positions. Farah's first husband, for example, "gave her two children and fists that pounded her with welts to cover her body, welts she ignored or covered until it broke her father's heart and he convinced her husband to release her with divorce to freedom, but there is no freedom for a divorced woman with two children" (Halaby, 2003b: 51).

Even when an AA relation between an Arab male and a female, like the one between Hala's parents, appears to be balanced and healthy, it turns out that it is not an AA relation, but rather, a PC relation. Hala's father is "*indulgent with [her] mother*. He even offered to let her continue her studies, in Jordan" (Halaby, 2003b: 10 [emphasis added]). He respects her wish before her death and agrees to let their daughter Hala travel to study in America (Halaby, 2003b: 45). The relation between Hala's parents is not a "healthy one," it reflects another face of covered superiority where a male Parent spoils his female Child –in this case his wife– expecting her to be "the perfect traditional bride: ready to follow orders, ready to serve" (Halaby, 2003b: 83).

Another AA transaction between an Arab male and a female is between Sharif and Hala. Sharif is good to Hala and listens to her, he makes her "feel the delight and power of [her] words" (Halaby, 2003b: 120), she is amazed at how familiar and comfortable she feels talking to him. For Hala, sitting with Sharif "is like sitting with the oldest friends in the world, no words are necessary, but when they come, they are most welcome," with him she feels "at peace" Halaby, 2003b: 133). Everything points that they perfectly suit each other (Halaby, 2003b: 134). Their relation reaches its purest point of sacrifice when Sharif, though he has a great deal of love for Hala, is willing to let go of the woman he adores to give her the chance to be happy (Halaby, 2003b: 195). He thinks Hala "needs to choose her own life" and advises her father to grant her this freedom of choice. He tells Hala: "I am an older man and I cannot give you what you need. I would always be good to you, I would always love you, but I am too old to expect that what I have to offer you is enough to keep you happy [...]. I have explored the world and have come back to settle. You are seeing it for the first time. I think you have come back to say good-bye" (Halaby, 2003b: 199). When Sharif ends his relation with Hala claiming he is older, thus she will never be happy with him, he not only breaks Hala's heart but breaks their line of communication as well. He hinders any further development of a "healthy I + You + position" (Berne, 1972: 86). It is as if Halaby prophesies that any AA transaction between an Arab male and female is doomed to failure.

One of the "strokes" common between *The Last Chapter* and *West of the Jordan* deals with the relations and transactions between Arab fathers and their daughters. Such a relation is not better than the relation between husbands and wives: "while our male intellectuals love to expound their liberated views in panel discussions or newspaper editorials, in private they're no better than petty dictators. My father's word was as arbitrary as it was final," Aisha says. She feels: "helpless as a slave. My supposed freedom from illiteracy, unemployment, the veil, were a joke, an illusion. I still had a chain around my neck" (Abouzeid, 2002a: 51). The relation of Aisha's father with his daughter is of an "I + You – position" (Berne, 1972: 86). It sheds light on a different face of PC transactions and patriarchal superiority where a male Parent is a dictator and is harsh on his female Child expecting her to blindly obey him, without even trying to respond to her father from an ego state other than the Child's.

If a Child cannot respond from the ego state expected of her and cannot respond from the ego state she longs for, i.e. of an Adult, she seeks escape. A Moroccan father causes his daughter to leave her home and escape to America, "he'd come home and beat on the door like a madman, until she came terrified to ask who it was." He would scream threateningly: "You open this door or I'll open your head, by God" (Abouzeid, 2002a: 23). Although twenty years have passed, the girl still remembers the story. It is a not-O.K. experience that has a life-long traumatic effect on her personality. Aisha comments on this story saying: "too bad her father isn't over there [in America]. She could sue him for child abuse" (Abouzeid, 2002a: 23).

In a similar manner, Halaby introduces Khadija who lives in America and who "run[s] and dial[s] 911 like they say to do in school" (Halaby, 2003b: 207). She is frightened when her father drinks a whole bottle of liquor and she wants the police to rescue her and her baby brother Hamouda, who is bleeding from their devilish father (Halaby, 2003b: 207). Khadija's father hits her with his belt and calls her names (Halaby, 2003b: 38). He is a drunk and forces her to drink alcohol then hits her and calls her liar. He drags her off in front of people like "a criminal" (Halaby, 2003b: 35). He treats her "worse than stray dogs" (Halaby, 2003b: 34). The PC relation between Khadija and her father is one of terrorism and depression, apparently the father is always the I + and Khadija has to be the You -. When Khadija responds from an Adult ego state and struggles back against her father, she is aware of the future consequences: "Scary is what is going to happen [...] they'll say it's my fault" (Halaby, 2003b: 207).

However, the truth is that the relation between Khadija and her father is not of "I + You - position", but rather of "I - You - position" which is the "futility" position of non-productivity where "I'm not-O.K., therefore, You must be not-O.K." (Berne, 1972: 87, 92). Khadija is the receiver of her father's projections. He "has many dreams that have been filled with sand. [. . . They] used to float like those giant balloons [...]. Now they don't float, and you can't even see what they are anymore" (Halaby, 2003b: 37). He is pushed out of his homeland by changed economic and political conditions and flees persecution, oppression and poverty only to meet "xenophobia and suffer [...] prejudice, discrimination, negative stereotyping, and ethnic slurs," thus he becomes "twice-minority" (Husbey-Darvas, 1994: 9, 11). He suffers from "ego-anxiety, whereby [. . . his] ego is able to constitute its own coherence only through aggressive objectification of the Other," therefore, he places Khadija in the position of this "inferiorized Other" (Ahmad, 1992: 182). Khadija's father is the "masochist" in the "melancholic position," he feels "I am the most unworthy person in the world" (Berne, 1972: 90), therefore, he seems to believe that Khadija, his child, must share him his futility.

On the other hand, Halaby presents Hala and her father who thinks she is "a kind girl" Halaby, 2003b: 195), and tells her he is "proud" of her and "can think of no

one here who would be a good match for [her],” he thinks she “should finish—or at least start—the university before [she] get[s] married” (Halaby, 2003b: 197). But the fact is that his nice words only come after persuasion and protest, Hala tells her father “he will lose [her] forever if he pushes too hard [...] yet, she [has] faith that he will do what is right” (Halaby, 2003b: 83). Finally, her father grants her “the greatest freedom” (Halaby, 2003b: 197). The transaction between Hala and her father starts as a PC transaction, but Hala crosses this transaction and responds from an Adult ego state altering the transaction between her and her father into an AA transaction without the communication being “broken off.” She reacts to “a communication stimulus conveying self-abasement or interpersonal hostility with a response inviting mutual Okness and cooperation” (Massey, 1993: 26).

If Arab men and women cannot do not seem to have healthy AA or PC communications and transactions in the novels, it is more likely that the relation between Arab females as colonized and their colonizers will not be easy, if impossible. There is an intimate interrelationship between the oppression of gender and the oppression of race, as if gender discrimination gives an excuse to racial discrimination. Sexism and racism are two faces of one coin:

if one examines racist terminology, one will find that it is regularly clothed in sexist language. The superior “race” is considered to be more masculine, the inferior one to be more feminine. [...] We hear arguments that the dominant group is more emotional, more disciplined, more hard working, more self-controlled, more independent, while the dominated group is more emotional, more self-indulgent, more lazy, more artistic, more dependent. And this is, of course, the same set of characteristics that sexist ideology claims distinguish men from women. (Wallerstein, 1991: 172)

Because Arab patriarchal societies raise women to be submissive, helpless and accept all forms of oppression, the Other/colonizer sees the Arab culture as incorporating extensive male control whereby the words of the husband and the father are law. Thereby, the superior Other finds an excuse to colonize and toy with Arab women and countries claiming to “crystallize [. . . his] developing standards of manliness and civilization” (Hurd, 2003: 36). However, “colonization, no matter, how ‘gentle,’ amounts to the taking of someone else’s land, and the imposing by force of an alien language and culture” (Abouzeid, 2002a: 121). The colonizer is like “a greedy neighbor who takes the best out of you and leaves you feeling empty” (Halaby, 2003b: 96). Abouzeid and Halaby believe there is a significant association between the recognition of Arab women’s identity and the recognition of Arabs’ political identity. Arabs’ disrespect for their women and for each other leads to their stigmatization and political exclusion by the Other/colonizer. The lesson Abouzeid and Halaby wish to teach Arabs is that it is time to stop gender marginalization and start healthy AA complementary

transactions between Arab males and females because gender marginalization always leads to race marginalization.

4. Colonizer vs. Woman/Arab/Colonized

Not only do Arab women in Halaby's and Abouzeid's texts suffer humiliation and alienation at the hands of their own menfolk at home, but they also experience the brutality of a world lived under the shadow of the colonizer. Halaby is aware of the humiliation Palestinian women face at the check points in their own homeland where they have to take off their clothes "all the way down to naked," while foreigners "cross from another spot with nothing more than a stamped paper for their passports" (Halaby, 2003b: 49, 48). The Palestinian women at the check points "move [...] slowly, waiting as if to buy vegetables from the last stand in the village, but really waiting to spread their legs for the enemy, who though they are very *polite* think older ladies are the most *dangerous* because they wear the most clothes and have had the most children; *they could hide an entire village between their legs if they wanted to*" (Halaby, 2003b: 49 [emphasis added]). A Moroccan woman in *The Last Chapter* says: "The Palestinian people [...] I feel their pain and it hurts me. I want it to stop. I want the killing of those children to stop, even if there is nothing in it for me. Do you see? I mean to say that, given the choice of ending my own agony or theirs, I'd choose to end theirs" (Abouzeid, 2002a: 148). Women's oppression takes a new and a wider shape which is race oppression. An Arab woman no longer identifies herself with other Arab women only but with the oppressed Arabs as a whole and unites with all of them. She erases the borders separating her identity as a woman and her identity as an Arab. She moves from the national to the transnational frame and is concerned with the transactions between the colonized/Arabs and the Other/colonizer and so is Halaby, who suggests four possible ways of dealing with the Other: "isolationism," "assimilation," "transnationalism" and "acculturation/in-betweenness."

First, Halaby proposes "isolationism" and total rejection of the Other. This solution calls for ending all transactions and communications between I and You. It promotes catching the first train home and "retreating back into one's problematic roots bearing the message that it's really better there, a more righteous place (where you might not be fully understood but where you at least have ties). Better to be there than to be with those privileged 'others'" (Hooks, 1990: 90). The colonized/isolationists "consider their culture, religion, or tradition as alien to [... the Other's] culture, sometimes even superior to it [...]. Fearing the encroachment of the [... Other's] mainstream culture, isolationists often retreat to their own [... roots]" which are their "sanctuaries" (Shain, 1996: 49). Isolationists are like Sitti in *West of the Jordan*, she believes that "no matter what our difficulties, it is better here [one's home]" (Halaby, 2003b: 96). Her heart is broken when those who travel to the Other's country return, "the minute they got here [their homeland]

with their eyes that had been trained to see glitter, they criticized their old houses, and they grumbled about the old ways of the village” (Halaby, 2003b: 98). They cannot stand their homelands anymore and do not feel at home in the countries of their ancestors.

Isolationists’ motto is: “Here Is Better Than There.” An Arab woman who has left Puerto Rico and returned to her Arab country says there is “crime and lack of morality” there, it is “a place where girls are women at eleven years old and boys shoot real guns at each other at twelve” (Halaby, 2003b: 52). She believes living in one’s Arab country is better and complains: “we had a very hard time when we were there [...]. There is so much crime. Several times we were robbed at gunpoint. I lost all my gold to thieves. The houses are like prisons with built-in bars to keep the evil out, but it doesn’t work; evil comes in anyway” (Halaby, 2003b: 53). Halaby refutes the woman’s complaints. She proves that organized crime is also found in the Arab world; Hala’s grandfather in Nawara “a big, powerful man with money and land and brains, [was] killed by strangers, or by friends. No one ever found out. Slain on his own land” (Halaby, 2003b: 16). Another man who was married to a Puerto Rican wife and had three children by her, says when he woke up every morning he felt he was “lying in the Devil’s bed,” so he returns to Palestine and now he has “a beautiful young wife who is Muslim and virtuous” and he thanks God for making him “realize what is right” (Halaby, 2003b: 52). However, the truth is that, similar to Other countries, there is also lack of morality in the Arab world. Um Lubna in Nawara, for example, is having an extramarital affair with Abou Khader. And Soraya is having a relation with several men and shockingly an incestuous relation with her maternal uncle.

Abouzeid, like Halaby, thinks that Arabs are not necessarily better than the Other. Her “stroke” is that Arabs, like the Other, have racism but they don’t call it that.⁵ Their racism is even more dangerous as it is, unlike the Other’s, “covert” not “overt.” Abouzeid introduces a scene on the bus that might have been in America. There is “a little black girl, with afro hair and a runny nose.” When her mother tells her “get up Gazelle [Deer], we’re getting off here,” a man behind her hears her name, repeats it “in astonishment,” and takes “the child by the scruff of the neck saying, ‘You call her Gazelle? This? How could you so abuse the name? She’s not a gazelle, she’s a little goat. I’m not going to put her down until you call her Goat.[...] I’m warning you [...] I won’t put her down until you say it’” (Abouzeid, 2002a: 14-15). Only when the mother says it, does the man let the little girl go: “get off Gazelle, you little brat, may God curse your parents” (Abouzeid, 2002a: 15). Abouzeid/Aisha comments that “if that scene had happened in the US we’d

⁵ Abouzeid’s consciousness of racism in Arab countries is based on reality. Her mother’s family in Sefrou has “a refined Andalusian culture, and its people, like all people of Andalusian origin, were full of chauvinism. They hated outsiders and would never marry their daughters to them, especially if they were Berbers or country people” (Abouzeid, 2002b: 347).

have called it racism, but because it happened here, we don't give it a name" (Abouzeid, 2002a: 15). Abouzeid and Halaby have succeeded in performing the hard task of pinpointing similarities rather than differences between I/Arabs and the Other. They want to reach the fact that Arabs should not call for "isolationism" depending on their ethical superiority as they have the same vices of the Other. Thus, Abouzeid and Halaby are against "isolationism," even though each thinks: "there *is* comfort to be in my own house, to wake up in my own language," meanwhile, each feels "the house [her homeland] is beginning to close in on" her (Halaby, 2003b: 77, 78).

The second option Halaby offers as a solution that might bridge the gap between I and the Other and fulfil a complementary transaction is of total assimilation into the mainstream society of the Other. The United States, as an example of the Other, is claimed to be a country that respects diversity and multiculturalism. All the transactions there are healthy and of three-handed position: "I + You + They +. This is the democratic community position of a neighborly family [...] stated as 'We love everybody'" (Berne, 1972: 90). The Other/colonizer is a melting pot where all minorities are assimilated into it so producing a homogeneous new race. Ginna Simms, for example, who lives next door to Soraya in the States, is "the weirdest mix of Russian and Black and Chinese and Puerto Rican" (Halaby, 2003b: 29).

Total assimilation is accepted by third generations, but rejected by members of the first generation who travel abroad and form minor communities as they come from the same village. First generations refuse assimilation because they regard it "as an ethnocentric and patronizing imposition on minority peoples struggling to retain their cultural and ethnic integrity" (Alba and Nee, 2003: 1). Soraya as one of the third generations says: "half of the village lives here in Glendale or Hollywood or Anaheim. The older people all act the same way they did when they were home, which isn't fair in a lot of ways because we're in America now, but they tell us that we are not supposed to be living an American life" (Halaby, 2003b: 31). In formal celebrations and weddings the old village ladies are dressed in "their best show-off *rozās*. They looked so out of place", those women with "flowing white scarves" appear to be from "another planet" (Halaby, 2003b: 31-32). Soraya thinks they are wrong, they must learn "to be like everyone else, who learns to take it, or leaves" (Halaby, 2003b: 85). Soraya here points that full assimilation requires that I give up my lifestyle and try to be identical to You/Other and learn all the lifestyles necessary for Your approval.

Feeling their inferiority and their "I – You + position" and aiming at winning full acceptance into the mainstream society, Soraya and Walid willingly "shed their foreign [Arab] ways and readily adopt the host society's values and lifestyle" (Husbey-Darvas, 1994: 15). Both of them try "to avoid the Arab community" in the States and have "pure white man" tastes (Halaby, 2003b: 57). Their slogan in life

is: “some minorities are fine, but live in an area that’s all minority and you’ve got problems. White people are better protected, so it’s better to live around them” (Halaby, 2003b: 57). This slogan has proven to be a myth. When Soraya and Walid go to The Jack Knife bar; “white name, white customers, white neighborhood” (Halaby, 2003b: 59), a white man curses them and calls them names thinking they are Mexican. Walid and Soraya try to persuade the man they are American but the moment he hears that he beats them and leaves Walid “laying in a heap on the sidewalk” (Halaby, 2003b: 59), thereby, situating him back to his real position in the margins. The policewoman who investigates the fight is aware that Soraya and Walid are beaten up for being Mexican but when she knows they are Palestinian, she tells them “well you got off pretty lucky then” (Halaby, 2003b: 60), as if being an Arab is a disgrace.

Soraya is conscious of the stereotypes depicting Arabs as physically or mentally inferior, the American movie always shows “the super American guy knocking the scummy Arab flat on the ground”, she wishes she “were a superhero like in those cartoons where she comes in and wipes out the bad guys and still looks great,” yet she realizes “there aren’t any Arab ones [...]. My hair is too dark, too thick; my skin too far away from white to let me even pretend to be an American superhero,” so she closes her eyes and dances hard “until the rage begins to fade” (Halaby, 2003b: 60). She suggests escape as a solution for all the injustices Arab face, an escape to a fantasy, dream-like world. Such stereotypes of Arabs created by the Other “permit the stereotyper to feel superior and infallible and therefore to transgress with impunity against the victim” (McCarus, 1994: 6). Soraya and Walid’s fight zoomed in the way the colonizer views the other: I/American can never have a relation with You/Mexican, let alone They/Arabs because I am your superior.

Abouzeid believes that the elimination of cultural differences and the disappearance of foreignness is a myth. The Other/colonizer will always have “Xenophobia: hatred of foreigners” (Abouzeid, 2002a: 48). The relation between the Other as a colonizer and the colonized is of “I + You – position.” The Other/colonizer not only holds an “I + You – position” but holds an “I + You – They – position.” This is the position of the solitary, self-righteous critic, the arrogant position in pure form. ‘Everybody must bow before me and be much like me as inferior people can’ (Berne, 1972: 90).

Total assimilation, according to Abouzeid and Halaby, is not the solution because “assimilatory change was almost exclusively one-directional, [...] the minority changed to make itself more like the majority, whose role was limited to accepting or rejecting the minority ‘petitioning’ to be allowed into the mainstream” (Alba and Nee, 2003: 64). In other words, the transaction between I/colonized and You/colonizer is in one direction, therefore, it will never succeed unless it is mutual and in two directions. Sitti says that when her son, who marries an American and is

totally Americanized, returns he “can’t sit still when he comes home. Walks around [the house] like he has worms in his toes” (Halaby, 2003b: 96). Such people believing in total assimilation want “to shed their own cultures, as if these were old skins no longer possessing any vital force, and wrap themselves in the mantle of Anglo-American culture” (Alba and Nee, 2003: 2). Their condition will be of ultimate loss, their situation will always be the way Soraya’s mother describes it: “lost in somewhere you grew up in, with a language you have taken, with a world that you want, but which is behind that clear steel curtain. *Watch it. Watch it all you want, but it will never be yours*” (Halaby, 2003b: 190). Some totally assimilated Arabs, especially of third generations, who do not speak Arabic and are not welcomed in the mainstream society, suffer a great loss of identity. They are “unconnected, like a charm without a chain to hang from” (Halaby, 2003b: 83).

Abouzeid is so much concerned with the consequences of total assimilation among which is the problem of losing identity, she wonders: “can you lose your identity the way you lose an identification card? Does some unseen part in the machinery of the self snap, suddenly and irreparably?” (Abouzeid, 2002a: 6). The answer is yes, Abouzeid gives an example, of a totally assimilated girl from Fes who has married an American, she “has forgotten Arabic entirely. She can’t interpret for visitors who don’t speak English.” When a Moroccan friend tells her how he misses Morocco, she accuses him of “clinging to the past” (Abouzeid, 2002a: 23). He tells her everyone misses his/her country and she must too, she replies, “I miss nothing about Morocco. Absolutely nothing. This is my country now” (Abouzeid, 2002a: 23). The girl from Fes chooses total assimilation into the mainstream culture. When she prefers English monolingualism and gives up her language, she simultaneously gives up her identity as “the aspects of [her] ethnic culture [...] embedded in the mother tongue [...] are diminished, if not lost, as fluency wanes” (Alba and Nee, 2003: 72). The feeling of cultural identity always presupposes a language. When a person gives up her/his language s/he simultaneously gives up “the system of difference which articulates identities, constructs positions for the subject – notably the subject position ‘I’ – which allows differentiation from others, and identity for the self” (Rice and Waugh, 1992: 120).

Halaby presents a different face of losing identity, resulting from total assimilation in the mainstream society of the Other. She presents Khadija who reaches the point of giving up her local food as it connects her with her origins in order to please the Other. When Khadija invites her friend Patsy over for dinner, she hopes her mother “cooks American food because she [doesn’t] think Patsy and her blond hair will like [their] food too much” (Halaby, 2003b: 14). According to Halaby, if I lose my name this equals my loss of identity and my willingness to be a mere copy of You/Other, because naming “function[s] as the site of an empowering self-definition” (Childers and Hentzi, 1995: 199), if I lose my name I lose power and thus I lose myself and my identity. Khadija who lives in the States thinks: “in American my name sounds like someone throwing up or falling off a bicycle.” She

is aware that she is named after Khadija, Prophet Muhammad's wife, but she says "I'm also sure that if the original Khadija went to school in America that she would hate her name just as much as I do" (Halaby, 2003b: 36). Ironically, she says "it's not like I'm dying to have an American name. I'd just like a different Arabic one" (Halaby, 2003b: 36), however, it is not the truth as later she describes her name as "ugly-sounding" and expresses her wish to be called Diana (Halaby, 2003b: 179, 37). If a person gives up her/his name, that means s/he is willing to give up her/his identity as well; Khadija tells her mother "I am just as American as anyone here" (Halaby, 2003b: 74). When her mother madly tells her in Arabic "*You* are Palestinian,' she replies in *English*. 'I am American'" (Halaby, 2003b: 74 [emphasis added]). Halaby is aware of the double importance of the role of Arab women when they travel abroad. It is primarily Arab women—like Khadija's mother—that "maintain traditional values and inculcate them in the succeeding generation. [...] They] also tend to feel that their stay in the [...] Other's country] is temporary and that they must therefore strive even harder to maintain traditional [...] values" (McCarus, 1994: 4). Sometimes third generations living abroad fight their traditional values, they are for total assimilation even, in Khadija's case, Americanization. They not only give up their names and their languages but wish to eliminate their roots as well. Americanized Arabs like Khadija lose their sense of belonging and their identities. Thus, assimilation, according to Abouzeid and Halaby, can never be the solution for forming a successful transactional relation between I and the Other.

The third solution Halaby offers to form a healthy transaction between I and the Other is of "transnationalism." This idea of transnationalism empathizes "the prospects for achieving an almost seamless connection between workaday lives in American and the origin society through a web of border-spanning cultural, social and economic ties" (Alba and Nee, 2003: 7). However, transnationalism, like assimilation, proves to be a failure in Halaby's text. Sameer Samaha works in the States until he has "enough saved up to go home and marry", he "came to this country [America] to be a success story, not millionaire success, but a place here and a house in Nawara and lots of kids and enough money to be a happy kind of success" (Halaby, 2003b: 86, 84). He marries Souad from Nawara, but never returns. He is always busy working to fulfil her, not his, dreams. She betrays him and her "American" lover kills him and the story is over. Halaby sends the message that transnationalism mostly fails because "I" will always be absorbed by "the Other" and will not have a separate life from his, the Other will always be like a web that entraps the self and will never let go of it.

The clue to the best possible solution –according to Halaby– for accomplishing a complementary transaction between I/Arabs and You/Colonized is given by Hala's maternal grandfather who is "open to new ideas" (Halaby, 2003b: 20). He always repeats "there is nothing wrong with letting a girl learn as much as a boy does. That is our only hope" (Halaby, 2003b: 20). He opposes some Arab men who say

that “a woman’s kingdom is her home [...]. A woman should learn just enough to raise her children and say her prayers. And that’s more than enough!” Such men “make use of whatever they can to shore up their crumbling hold on the world” (Abouzeid, 2002a: 133). Yet, Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said, “seeking knowledge is the religious duty of every Muslim man and woman.’ A religious duty, no less, like fasting and prayer, not merely a privilege or right” (Abouzeid, 2002a: 133). Aisha in *The Last Chapter* supports the opinion of Hala’s grandfather, she says: “these days educated women are not obliged to marry for economic reasons or to satisfy social expectations. Things have changed. Women can choose” (Abouzeid, 2002a: 45). However, she is still worried because the colonizer interferes in Arabs’ education and believes that “all we had got from the colonialists in terms of education was a second-rate knowledge of their language” (Abouzeid, 2002a: 43-44). Consequently, the colonized suffers from “a double exile from his own tradition and from that which he has been offered by education and colonial example” (Griffiths, 1978: 79).

Being of Arab-American origins guides Halaby to the perfect therapy to Arabs’ transactional problems. The best answer is offered by nature when Hala visits Petra and desires “*to go up to the top where the rocks meet the sky,*” she describes her experience as follows: “we are in the *sky* so high that we are on the same level as the *blue*, and when we sit down, we see a lizard, as big as my arm and clear *blue*, the color of the *sky* [...] . He wants to *fit in*” (Halaby, 2003b: 156 [emphasis added]). Fitting in is problematic because it carries negative connotations as it sometimes necessitates a kind of “disempower[ment] and a conscious censor [. . . of] speech so as to ‘fit better’ in settings where we [people from underprivileged backgrounds] are perceived as not belonging” (Hooks, 1990: 90). Halaby chooses the difficult way of fitting in where one maintains one’s values and traditions while incorporating meaningful knowledge gained in other locations. Fitting in is in Halaby’s notion analogous to hybridity or acculturation or in-betweenness, may be even integration.⁶ The position of in-betweenness is a place where “the minority culture takes on select aspects of the majority culture but retains its own identity” (McCarus, 1994: 2). Fitting in here does not mean the whitening of one’s culture to be accepted by the Other but rather refers to a negotiation of difference. Halaby suggests the performance of a double operation of intermingling with the mainstream society while keeping one’s identity. She proves that various cultures can mingle together within the boundaries of a nation without one losing its

⁶ Laila Halaby has always tried to balance two worlds, that of her Jordanian father’s culture and her upbringing by her American mother. She says: “I was always in this purgatory stage of ‘otherness,’ neither here nor there. My name never seemed to get pronounced right [like Khadija’s]. And people would make these really strange comments to me. I remember a boy in my first-grade class, when he found out I was Arab, asked me how many camels I had and how many wives my father was married to. It was shocking” (Halaby, 2003).

identity. Hybridity is “a doubleness that both brings together, fuses, but also maintains separation” (Young, 1995: 22). Even the name Hala suggests balance. Hala (in English halo) means a circle of light. The name Hala/o, with its hybrid connotation, also reflects Halaby’s belief that acculturation is the best solution for achieving a successful three-handed transaction. Hala/o is equated with security. It is like the placenta’s halo, “the first house to surround us” which “we carry with us everywhere, like some child’s security blanket” (Irigaray, 1988: 418).

Hala takes the decision: “It is time to start something new, and something old, not to fix something unfinished. I will watch just the right way, to see the underside of things, the thinking things and the forgetting things, as my mother used to say. And then I will start university, and I will not come back in disgrace” (Halaby, 2003b: 204). She travels to America wearing a *roza*, a *thobe*, instead of her “gray, ankle-length [western] dress” which “scratches [...] everywhere” and which she has thought would give her “confidence” (Halaby, 2003b: 5). She is no longer “unconnected, like a charm without a chain to hang from” (Halaby, 2003b: 83) because now she has “a gold charm of Palestine” which she puts in her necklace and runs her fingers “along the edges” as if studying it so as not to forget (Halaby, 2003b: 204). She takes her mother’s advice and will remember all the stories of Nawara, which I think reflect the four possible ways of not/communicating with the Other. Hala will remember:

everything, including the tragedies. Remember this one, whose house was built on American money and now stands empty as he waits for retirement age, hoping he will not have a heart attack before then, hoping the Israelis will not move in before he comes home [transnationalism]. Remember the ones who left, who fled, whose memories are vague and lives are changed [assimilation]. Remember the young men in their prime, who work twelve-hour days, driving taxis, running grocery stores, selling merchandise door to door [isolation]. Remember all those women lost in different ways, with no tomorrows. Remember the young ones, who came here as babies, but who cannot remember what they have not seen and therefore have no reason to behave [unconnectedness]. (Halaby, 2003b: 219)

Hala must remember because her uncle’s house in America where she is temporarily staying is a “show-off with no heart” (Halaby, 2003b: 217). The “empty” walls of the “scrubbed-clean, no imagination house that makes her deadly tired,” are of “grayish, whitish abstract” (Halaby, 2003b: 217). It is ultimately different from her mother’s house in Amman, where “every nook and cranny [is] filled with something [...] [that] take[s] you somewhere else, to make you think. Either a memory resurrected [...] or a joy to feel [...]. No place for thoughts to stop” (Halaby, 2003b: 217).

Living in the dominant society and culture makes Hala alienated from her mother culture and insecure. That is why she buys “frames of all sizes and colors,” then “pass[es] a travel agent and ask[s] for posters of Jordan. They only have Morocco

and Egypt, which will do. By evening the bare walls are bearable, lively different and familiar;" this way she stitches and tucks all her memories under her "scratchy blanket [the Other's country]" (Halaby, 2003b: 219-20). Though Hala literally leaves home, she keeps the ground of her own being and figuratively takes her homeland with her. After all there is hope in the future without abandoning the past. There is hope in reaching an in-between solution. There is hope when Arab countries cross the boundaries of I/Arab and the Other/Arab while each keeps their identity. There is hope when Arab countries unite together and find common ground in their commitment to an Arab identity, to be able to reach a three-handed position of successful neighborly family, which is a democratic transaction of "We love everybody" (Berne, 1972: 90). There is hope when We are All O.K., when I/Arab + You/Arab + They/Other nations +.

5. Conclusions

Both *The Last Chapter* and *West of the Jordan* succeed in uncovering to Arabs the "trash" they are doing to their women and to each other and in guiding them to all the possible ways of handling the Other either through "isolationism," "assimilation," "transnationalism" or "acculturation." Abouzeid and Halaby believe the first three options do not allow or encourage any real healthy transactions between I and the Other. On the other hand, Halaby encourages acculturation thinking that it is the best possible solution that can promote complementary transactions. The two novelists emphasize the presence of the voice of women, the question of identity, language and politics. They both employ the first-person narrative technique following the concept of "womenspeak" (Irigaray, 1988: 421). Though, the first person in their novels "refers to the personal, maybe even to the intimate [...]. It reshapes [...] the self-carrying it forwards with an outstretched hand beyond the boundaries of mere individual self. It is the first, the original person, who stands for all" (Mamdouh, 1998: 67). Halaby in her employment of first-person technique is more objective than Abouzeid, as she does not limit self-expression to one female character like Abouzeid, but allows more than one female character to speak and express herself freely.

Language has always been problematic to writers. When choosing English for writing her novels Halaby may be condemned for perpetuating the unequal relationship between the colonizer and colonized. She is aware of the power of the language and how it can bring peoples closer or set them apart. Yet, she tries to use English for her advantage: as a link between cultures. She solidifies her identity by using Arabic words written in English letters. The untranslated word from another language when inserted in the text becomes "more physical in its texture than the rest of the text, thick and indecipherable, it is the body of the [...] writer] asserting itself to the [...] Other's] mind. On another level it may also marginalize the reader to the text in a similar way to which the writer is marginalised by the language of the tradition in which she writes" (Green and LeBihan, 1992: 289). Therefore,

language gives Halaby a connection with her roots and for her it plays a double role. It gives her a chance to exchange positions with the Other to make him/her feel the deliberate exclusion s/he consciously imposes on her. More important the weaving of Arabic words written in English letters into an English text proves that the two cultures can become inextricably linked. Halaby's language "is a mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance," where she brings "different languages in contact with one another" (Bakhtin, 1981: 358, 361). Hala/by's paces are more dynamic than Abouzeid's, she is looking for and is making the future where multicultural people can reach the position of mutual "O.K.ness" with the slightest change. She deconstructs Rudyard Kipling's premise that "East is East, and West is West and, never the twain shall meet," arguing that East and West complement one another and hopes people can reach a state of completeness where there are always complementary transactions. Her novel and her language, unlike Abouzeid's, act as a bridge between two cultures.

For Abouzeid and Halaby searching for woman's identity is not only a personal but a political strategy of survival and resistance. The final world Halaby and Abouzeid seem to profess is that "in front of God we are all equal" (Halaby, 2003b: 55). Women are exposed to different faces of tyranny all over the world. They suffer more because they are doubly marginalized; they are exposed to gender marginalization and race marginalization. Arabs' future hope in annihilating race marginalization is conditioned by ending gender marginalization. Women must be granted both their rights and the respect they deserve, because the keys to the Arabs' future is "the economic and social empowerment of their women" (Holoh, 2003, online). There is a connection between the liberation of [. . . Arabs], and the liberation of women. [...] without educated women, there could be no progress. And this is where it must all start if we are to succeed" (Holoh, 2003, online). Only then will Arabs have a society where discrimination, prejudice and inequality are absent.

Abouzeid and Halaby, you have succeeded to move from the margins to the centre, enlightening Arabs and offering them clues to solve not only Arab women's problems but those of Arab men as well.

*You are the voice of many silent voices.
You are the child of your people,
The seeing eyes of the folk.
You set out to tell their stories
And express their heartfelt feelings.
Carry on this track as long as you can.
Remain a child in heart, as far as you can.
We are put on earth to light And
Shed light on the dark corners of life.* (Professor Sabri Tabrizi in Abouzeid, 2002a: 157-58)

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