The Politics of Female Identity in Diasporic Contact Zones: A Case Study of Arab Diasporic Short Fiction

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Abstract   In the speech she delivered to the Modern Language Association in 1991, Mary Louise Pratt described contact zones as ideal spaces for cross-cultural interaction. This idealism, however, means not that contact zones are conflict-free spaces, since living in a place where cultures "meet, clash, and grapple with each other" (3) is expected to take the individual out of his comfort zone. This cultural instability, nevertheless, is what helps him acquire one of the arts which Pratt sees essential to successful social interaction in contact zones. Acculturation, the process by which the individual selects the aspects he finds suitable from the host culture and rejects those he does not find so without getting emotionally involved, helps him form a less culturally fixed identity and more socially successful relations across cultures. When read in light of a later article in which Pratt (1994) studies the relation holding the female to her nation, this speech can help give a better understanding of the formation of the female's identity in culturally diverse settings, especially in the case of the diasporic female who, due to harsh political, social or economic conditions, has been forced to leave her home country and to settle in a foreign one. To this end, the study examines the impact contact zones have on the formation of the female's identity in a diasporic context, specifically the Arab-American diasporic context by analyzing four selected short stories by four Arab American writers: Mohja Kahf's "Manar of Hama", Laila Halaby's "Hair, Men and Prayers", Samia Serageldin's "It's Not About That" and Pauline Kaldas' "He Had Dreamed of Returning". The aim is to examine the extent to which the diasporic female protagonist in each of them is able to form a less culturally rooted identity and to establish more successful social relations with members of other cultures in

contact zones.

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Introduction

In one of her articles, "Women, Literature, and National Brotherhood" (1994), Mary Louise Pratt remarks that a relationship of unease ties the female to her native community in the modern nation. In those societal spaces, to which Benedict Anderson (1983) has given the name of 'imagined communities', the female occupies a position "precariously other to the nation" (51) as her role is seen to be limited to the functions of reproduction and the mothering of future generations. The diminutive role she is given is, as Pratt explains, expected due to the androcentrism of the Andersonian model which defines citizenship by three masculine criteria: limitedness, sovereignty and fraternity. Given the difficulty of defining the feminine by these masculine criteria, the female is likely to be perceived as a source of threat by the male who, to guard himself against this "fundamental instability" (51), chooses to limit her role to the biological function. To this end, Pratt contends that Anderson's model should not be taken at face value in assessing the female's relation to her own nation or to foreign ones. For, what validates seeing "the reproductive capacity...of those infinite, all too elastic female bodies" as a source of peril is its being beyond "the control of fraternity" (7).

Pratt's description of the female's ability to reproduce "outside the control of fraternity" (7) as a "source of peril" (7) is better understood when read in light

of the speech she delivered in 1991 on contact zones. In Anderson's model,[1] the female's reproductive capacity is perceived from a masculine perspective and this explains why her elasticity is seen as a source of peril to the stability of the nation. It also explains why the identity she acquires there is fixed and culturally rooted. Pratt, however, does not agree that her instability represents a threat against which the nation should be guarded, for she believes that this instability is a feature shared by the nation as a whole, not only by its women: "to say that women are situated in permanent instability in the nation is to say that nations exist in permanent instability" (51). The impossibility of geographically isolating women from men in the same community and the inability of men to reproduce without women prove that the female's instability is not "precariously other to the nation" (51), but is intrinsic to its construction. Nevertheless, the "deep [gender] cleavage in the horizontal fraternity" has kept the female "especially anomalous" (52) in her own nation and forced her to seek "political and social engagement" (51) elsewhere.

> In the face of their exclusion from the national fraternity,..., women's political and social engagement became heavily *inter* nationalist, and often *anti* nationalist. Elite women activists established a long-standing presence and commitment in such spheres as the Pan-Americanist movement, international pacifism, and syndicalism, and in transnational issues of health, education, and human rights. (51-52)

It is here that the connection between the two works by Pratt can be detected. The statement she makes on the female's predicament in the modern nation in "Women, Literature, and National Brotherhood" intersects with her perception of contacts zones as spaces of cultural instability in her speech "Arts of the Contact Zone." This common aspect requires more attention given Pratt's observation about the "heavily *inter*nationalist, and often *anti* nationalist" (51) engagement of women who feel excluded from their own nations. The significance of reading the two works along each other and of employing this intersecting reading as a critical framework

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1 It is clear that restricting our perception of the nation to Anderson's imagined communities does not help render a better understanding of how social relations and interactions are formed and maintained across the culturally diverse communities of the twenty-first century, for rarely are such communities found in the world nowadays. However, what makes Anderson's model of the imagined community of relevance to the current study is that it can be employed as a background against which the kind of identity the female forms in contact zones can be better examined and evaluated.

in literary studies lies, therefore, in giving a better understanding of the formation of the female's identity in culturally diverse settings, especially in the case of diasporic females who, due to harsh political, social or economic conditions, have been forced to leave their home countries and to settle in foreign ones.

Diasporic Settings as Contact Zones

In her speech, Pratt defines contact zones as spaces where multiple "cultures, meet, clash, and grapple with each other" (3). The instability resulting from the meeting of different cultures in contact zones makes them ideal spaces for the female who will feel less socially pressured in such an environment to repress her unstable nature. Pratt does not, however, give special focus to the question of gendered identity, the female's identity in particular, in her discussion. The examples she cites are mostly limited to geographically small multicultural settings such as the classroom which are not representative of other more geographically and culturally diverse settings in which gender is considered a key element in shaping social interaction. Thus, when read along the article "Women, Nation and Brotherhood", "Arts of the Contact Zone" can help give a better understanding of the role living and interacting in multicultural spaces play in the formation of the female's identity, especially in the case of women whose residence in those zones is conditioned by political, social or economic reasons beyond their control. Moreover, given that contact zones can also be found in settings which are more culturally diverse, more geographically extensive and more politically and socially invasive such as war zones, countries with diasporic populations and refugee camps, looking for points of meeting between the two works can help understand the challenges the female faces as she tries to form new social relations there.

Amongst the numerous forms of contact zones which have noticeably increased in number nowadays and where the question of identity formation (female identity in particular) is controversially approached in the academia are diasporic settings. Given that social interaction in those settings is not only affected by the individual's cultural background, but by other factors shaping the power network in them such as gender, politics and class necessitates giving more attention to understanding how social relations are formed in them, especially in the case of the female who finds herself forced to deal with differences between cultures and genders as well. As those women interact with culturally different groups (men and women) in the new countries, they do so based on the cultural codes they have internalised in their home countries. Their cultural mindsets, however, are expected to change as a result of their exposure to new culturally different ones. When seen in light of Pratt's

perception of contact zones as spaces of cultural instability, this change shows that the unstable nature of the female's identity is not repressed in contact zones as it is in monocultural settings. As the female interacts with individuals of different cultural backgrounds there, her unstable nature manifests itself in her ability to deal with cultural differences without getting emotionally involved, to form a less culturally rooted identity and to establish more healthy social relations.[1]

This said, the study examines the impact contact zones have on the formation of the female's identity in a diasporic context, specifically the Arab-American diasporic context by analyzing four selected short stories by four Arab American writers: Mohja Kahf's "Manar of Hama", Laila Halaby's "Hair, Men and Prayers", Samia Serageldin's "It's Not About That" and Pauline Kaldas' "He Had Dreamed of Returning". The aim is to examine the extent to which the diasporic female protagonist in each of them is able to form a less culturally rooted identity and to establish more successful social relations with members of other cultures in contact zones.

Diasporic Contact Zones as Transcultural Spaces

When Pratt first introduced the notion of the 'contact zone' in her 1991 keynote address to the Modern Language Association, she stressed the heterogeneous nature of those meeting points. Contact zones are spaces where the reductive representations produced by "discrete, coherently structured, monolingual edifices" (4), whether in real life, literary works or speech, are rejected. This, however, should not lead to the rash conclusion that contact zones are utopian spaces where discrimination is brought to an end and difference is accepted unconditionally. This point is stressed by Pratt, who explains that the contact zone encounters are not expected to be conflict-free. Those encounters are intentionally meant to take us out of the 'safe houses', which in the Andersonian model of the modern nation, are indispensable to building a shared foundation of "healing, mutual recognition...

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1   In *Contact Zones: Aboriginal and Settler Women in Canada's Colonial Past* (2005), Katie Pickles and Myra Ruther Dale study interaction in contact zones by tracing them back to their points of origin (colonial spaces). Their focus is directed towards aboriginal and settler Canadian women whose interaction has taken place in colonial settings. Their study shows that whether belonging to the dominant or the marginal culture, women usually exist at the juncture between their culture or origin and the foreign culture. Thus, as Canadian women "occupied the spaces of colonial encounter between Aboriginals and newcomers" (1), they have proved to be better suited for cross-cultural interaction, which is a point Pratt highlights in her article "Women, Nation and Brotherhood", as she notes that women who have been denied political and social engagement on the national level seek it across borders.

shared understandings, knowledges" (8) amongst the members of the same community. Anderson's imagined communities might seem to many to be conflict-free zones, especially when coupled with strong feelings of comradeship. Yet, this seeming peacefulness, very much like the feelings of fraternity bringing their members together, is 'imagined' and therefore unproductive. The clash resulting from the meeting of different cultures, languages and sometimes mindsets in one space, however, is real, lived and productive. It is real because it is not born out of a "homogeneous community or a horizontal alliance" which, according to Pratt, is "[professed], but systematically" (5) unrealized. It is productive because it helps arrive at a better understanding of how social relations are formed transculturally.

As culturally different groups are brought together, a two-way process of interaction is initiated between those belonging to the dominant culture and the other ethnic minorities. The viability of the interactive process, no doubt, is dependent on how deeply rooted the network of power relations is into the structure of the multicultural society,[1] for just as social interaction in imagined communities "is defined from the point of view of the party in authority (the male)" (6), it is so in contact zones which also represent "contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonisation, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today" (3). Nevertheless, the conflicts arising from the bringing together of different factors do not block the possibility for social interaction. This point is emphasized by Claude Helen Mayer in an article entitled "Navigating Contact Zones in Twenty-First Century Schools: Creative Identity Development in Two Complex Transcultural Spaces" (2021), in which she explains that when the individual starts seeing himself as a member of a transcultural society, he learns to start "expanding or minimizing selected identity parts to create 'safe zones'" (abstract) where cultural differences are accepted, understood and selectively adopted. Those safe zones, it should be noted, are different from the ones that Anderson's imagined communities represent, for while the shared foundation which brings the members of an imagined community together results in a culturally fixed identity, it does not in contact zones. This entails that interacting in contact zones is not possible when the individual insists on sticking to an identity transfixed

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1   In "Identity trans-formation in contact zones: sociallization of Israeli immigrant youth in Canada" (2013), Yonah Atari explains that "multi-directional" (abstract) power relations are at work in contact zones: vertical power relations with members of the mainstream culture and horizontal power relations with the other ethnic cultures. The interplay between the two spectrums of power relations creates a matrix of intermingling safe spaces and contested ones, "hindering and facilitating social interaction" (abstract) simultaneously.

by his cultural orientation. The way to make interaction a successful process is, therefore, to start a dialogue between the culture in authority and the one on the margin in a process where the latter is given the space to "construct a parodic, oppositional representation of the conqueror's" (3) own.[1]

In order for a meeting space to become a contact zone, it has to be perceived as a transcultural space by those living and interacting in it. Leaving one's native country and settling in a new one does not, therefore, condition getting accepted in the new place with complete assimilation into the mainstream culture. Acculturation can sometimes lead the individual to risk losing his own national identity as a replacement to a new one in line with that of the country he has chosen to reside in. At the same time, living in a contact zone does not entail rejecting the mainstream culture altogether, for as much as acculturation works by fixating identity, deculturation does the same. This point is repeatedly dwelt on by Pratt who believes that no contact zone can serve the designated function of a healthy network of cross-cultural relations without witnessing a two-way process of interaction taking place between the different cultural groups there. That explains why she repeatedly emphasises that interaction in the contact zone ought to be transcultured, meaning that individuals belonging to ethnic minorities should be given the chance to "select and invent from materials transmitted by a dominant metropolitan culture" (4). The importance of the process of transculturation[2] lies in the space it opens for selective appropriation. As members of ethnic minorities are exposed to the mainstream

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1   How can this "parodic, oppositional representation" (3) take place in reality? First, such parodic dialogues serve a means to respond to certain representations employed by the ones wielding authority. In her speech, Pratt uses the term "space of colonials encounters" to describe contact zones since it is in colonial settings that they first came to exist. Recently, however, those encounters have started to be seen from multiple perspectives, many of which have taken the form of responses to previous one-sided representations.

Second, the parodic dialogues which take place in contact zones can be seen as part of the process of transculturation at work there. Contrary to the other two extreme processes of acculturation and deculturation, transculturation is based on selective appropriation . This means that, as a member of an ethnic minority, the diasporic chooses not to go to the extreme of either rejecting the "repre-sentational repertoire" (4) of the mainstream culture or language or of blindly imitating it. Quite the opposite, he realizes that though he cannot "control what emanates from the dominant cul-ture," (4) he still can control what he absorbs from it.

2   The term transculturation was coined by the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz in 1940 to refer to the process of how two or more cultures merge and converge. Unlike its two other extremes, acculturation and deculturation, transculturation gives more space for the individual to adopt what suits him from the mainstream culture and to keep what serves him from the native culture. Due to this flexibility, Pratt lists it as one of the arts needed in contact zones.

culture, they do not feel pressured to adopt every aspect of it; they are given the freedom to select what suits them and discard what does not. The same process, of course, applies to the other side of the spectrum, so that members of the dominant culture are encouraged to appropriate what they deem apt to their own from the minor cultures. In this sense, no aspect of either culture, the dominant or the marginalised, is reduced or under-represented and this initiates the ongoing process of interaction needed to turn that meeting space into a contact zone. Here only and under such conditions can we observe a change in the individual's, whether the member of the dominant culture or the marginalised culture, perception of cultural difference so that he not only starts to accept difference but is able to engage in more successful relations with those different from him without feeling the threat of losing his cultural identity or being forced to assimilate to be socially accepted.

In the following section, the four selected short stories will be analyzed to examine the extent to which the diasporic female protagonist in each of them is able to lead a life of her own choice in the host country, whether in the relations she forms with members of her own ethnicity, members of the other ethnic minorities or members of the dominant culture, by appropriating the aspects of the mainstream culture which suit her and rejecting those which do not. The aim is to prove that the more social relations are transcultured in societies where different cultures interact, the more those societies are seen as contact zones and the more those women are able to understand and accept the difference of those with whom they are interacting. The effect is as well observed in the more inclusive identity those women acquire in those societies. Thus, whether living in a contact zone and engaging tolerantly with those who are culturally different can help the female develop an identity not solely defined by her cultural upbringing is the question the current study will attempt to answer through the analysis of cross-cultural interaction in the four selected short stories.

Discussion

The selected short stories are written by four diasporic writers coming from different Arab countries. Kahf is Syrian, Halaby is Jordanian, Serageldin and Kaldas are Egyptian. The four short stories feature four women (Manar, Jubayna, Nadia and Nancy) who move from their native countries to foreign countries for different reasons. As the authors represent the women's interactions in the new multicultural settings, they send implicit messages about the impact those interactions have on the kind of identity they acquire in diaspora as well as their ability to develop the needed arts to make those interactions successful. To start with, the four women

exhibit some similarities and differences at the same time. First, they realize that since their social interactions take place in multicultural settings, new communication skills are needed. However, not all of them act according to these realisations; some of them choose not to as will be shown in the discussion below. Second, the four women show similarities and differences in the way they deal with the two societies of which they are part now, the native and the host societies. While some choose to solely define their relations in light of their native cultural upbringing, others choose to straddle the two cultures and to define their relations based on mutual recognition of the two cultures. Third, the four women's cultural upbringing plays an integral role in the relations they form in the host countries. In the case of some of them, it serves to hinder their progress in the new society; in the case of others, it serves to ease the process of integration. Fourth, the four women develop, with varying degrees, a more inclusive identity as they engage in new relations which help bring them to the awareness that a less fixated identity is needed in contact zones. This new identity, however, is not equally embraced by the four women. While some choose to reject being brought out of the comfort zone that a culturally fixed identity offers them; others see this new identity as the green card they need to become full fledged members of those new societies.

The discussion below will analyse the similarities and differences listed above between the four women in the selected short stories by questioning the extent to which each of them has acquired and improved the art of transculturation which, according to Pratt, is indispensable to making the contact zone experience a successful one.

Deculturation: Rejecting Blindly

Many immigrants arrive to the foreign country with an unwavering determination to reject its culture and people. They do so with the pretext that the mere exposure to the new culture is likely to result in the erasure of their cultural identity which they derive from being physically attached to their home countries. Their fear is also intensified when they choose to settle in culturally open and diverse societies. In the face of this openness, they find themselves in a defensive state through which they insist on avoiding, or at least minimising, any form of communication with members of the dominant culture and sometimes with members of other ethnic minorities. Some choose to reside in separate areas of the country, while others go to the extreme of developing feelings of hatred towards those who are culturally different (Lalami, 2017).

A case in point is the short story "Manar of Hama" by the Syrian-American

writer Kahf. In the story, the reader is introduced to Manar, who has been forced to leave Syria because of the war. The resentment she feels at being forced to leave her home country and to live in America extends to the food in the country which she completely rejects; she cannot even bear the taste of cheese, cucumber or eggplant there. The keen desire to eat and cook Syrian dishes only shows that Manar has constructed an identity based on fixated associations rooted in the culture of the country she has been born in. Moreover, the fact that she has not chosen to leave Syria but has been forced to takes those feelings to an extreme. She finds it difficult to become transcultured, thinking that by doing so, she will have to let go of the old self and form a new one which is alien to her.

Two points are worth pondering on here. Manar sees her life in America as one placed on the verge between two extremes she has to choose from: acculturation or deculturation. She can either accept to be absorbed by the new culture or reject it altogether. The feelings of guilt at having to abduct her old self and those of fear at having to face the unknown force her to choose to reject whatever form the American culture takes in front of her eyes. In the story, she does so by refusing the food Americans eat, the educational system they follow at school and the social relations they form in daily life. Her refusal is as well extended to the daily activities she is forced to participate in. In the story, we see her interacting with the principal at her kids' school, with the shopkeepers and with the hippies later as she follows the spice girl. In those interactions, she is rarely noticed to exhibit the ability to adopt what suits her from the dominant culture and to reject what does not without showing prejudice.

> My children can babble away in English by now and they look at their mother who cannot speak two words to the school secretary and I know they are embarrassed. They are already in another world, one I don't understand. They do things that make the hair go white... What do Americans care about modesty, they are the world leaders in immorality, this everyone knows. (111-112)

It is clear that Manar fails to forge a link between the multicultural space where the interaction takes place and the productive features Pratt associates with the contact zone. She is neither able to start a process of cultural exchange through which she can adopt certain aspects from the dominant culture as her own, nor is she able to reject it without getting emotionally involved. As Pratt makes clear in her discussion, those people spend a difficult time trying to get used to life in the

foreign country, because, for them, the difference represented by that culture is not only threatening, but also repulsive. This makes life in America hardly bearable for Manar, compared to her husband who urges her to accept the taste of the American cheese instead of reminiscing about the taste of the Syrian cheese, and to her children who offer to teach her some English to use in her school visits.

The climactic incident in the story, however, sheds light on a different side of Manar's personality. As she follows the spice girl and meets the culturally and religiously diverse group the latter resides with, her attitude starts to change. In fact, the short meeting and interaction Manar has there serves as a good example of the significant role the contact zones arts play in creating a harmonious space where different cultural groups can coexist. Upon first meeting them, Manar not only rejects their lifestyle, but feels offended as well. The way those people are dressed, the fact that men and women socialize with no gender-enforced boundaries, the weird rituals and chanting all make her confused. And given that Manar lacks the art to make this experience a transcultural one, by choosing what befits her cultural upbringing and rejecting what does not tolerantly, it is expected to see her leaving the place immediately. This, however, does not happen in the story. She not only starts a conversation with them asking about their religion and origins, but joins them in the meal they have been preparing, shattering, in this way, the readers' expectations. Unlike in the previous interactions, Manar is able to accept the different behaviors and rituals the group has and this helps her to choose not to see them as a threat to her. She also starts to identify herself with some of these aspects and is able to find common ground on which to relate to those people and to stop rejecting them for their difference.

It is clear that that short meeting will undeniably affect Manar's future interactions with culturally different people in America, and this is, to a large extent, seen in the open ending of the story when Manar is driven by the spice girl back to the point from where she started following her, thinking of their last words with her, "God is love." The universality of their farewell statement intensifies the impact this short meeting leaves on Manar, building in us the expectation of seeing a more open-minded, tolerant version of the biased Manar in the future. This point is emphasized by Priscila Campolina De Sá Campello, who argues in an article entitled "Reconfigurations of the Concept of Home in Mohja Kahf's 'Manar of Hama'" (2015), that Manar's perception of the place she should call a home becomes less culturally rooted towards the end of the story (28-30). Nonetheless , we are never sure whether this change will help become more culturally tolerant, for in contact zone not only is the individual expected to show flexibility in his

perception of who he is and how he interacts with different individuals, but is also expected to acquire and improve certain skills to help him make the best out of that experience. The hope is there, but will Manar work as hard as needed to nurture it all the way through?

From Deculturation to Acculturation: Standing on Shaky Grounds

Despite realizing that rejecting cultural difference is not the needed means of social survival in the foreign country, some individuals face difficulty making this new experience a transcultural one. They keep wavering between acceptance and rejection, each based on past experiences through which the current experience of cross-cultural interaction is defined (Lalami 2017). In "Hair, Prayer and Men," Halaby portrays an airplane episode in the life of her protagonist Jubayna, a Palestinian woman residing in the US. Early in the story, the reader is told that Jubayna's complexion and hair colour make her look more American than Arab, to the extent that she is in many situations taken by Americans to be one of them. During the years she has lived in America, Jubayna has come to the realization that her American appearance forms an important part of who she is. She has also learnt as well that she should make use of this privilege to build successful social relations with culturally different individuals there. Read in light of Pratt's discussion on the arts of the contact zone, Jubayna's reliance on her American-like appearance can be seen as a form of transculturation, as she selects this aspect from the American culture and tailors it to serve her in her social life there.

> She counters this with her own war on the War on Terror, by using her American passport and crazy blond hair to blend in. What are they going to do? Put her, a tall blond female attorney, in Guantanamo? Send her back to Jordan? Threaten that if she doesn't give up some names or whereabouts of sleeper cells that they will tell her parents she left her Republican husband for a Zionist? (225)

It is clear that Jubayna has made herself comfortable with being taken as an American because of her looks. Compared to Manar, whose rejection of the American culture and lifestyle is openly expressed, Jubayna knows well how to play it safely by making the best out of her looks.

When she boards the plane and is seated next to the talkative American man, she does not mind spending the flight "sitting next to a radio interview" (229), talking, pausing and talking again. Unlike Manar, Jubayna is good at accepting

difference without feeling threatened to lose her identity. This, of course, does not mean that Jubayna has chosen to completely assimilate into the American society and to let go of the Palestinian part of her identity. In the story, Halaby implicitly indicates that behind the American appearance, there is a mind that perceives its surroundings from the perspective of an Arab who senses fear when someone is treated differently because he looks Arab. In her frequent travels, Jubayna has shown readiness to act as "the Ralph Nader for Middle Eastern travelers" (226), readying herself to "jump to [their] defense should someone act inappropriately or even just unkindly" (226). Like Manar, Jubayna is aware of how sticky the terrorist stereotype has become to Arabs there, and being herself the Barbie-looking girl who is immune to it has not made it vanish. It lurks there at the back of her head every time she notices a dark-skinned man or a scarfed woman detained at any of the airport checkpoints. These thoughts, however, do not seem to threaten the relations she forms with the Americans with whom she interacts, and this makes her more qualified to form successful long-term relations with individuals whose cultural backgrounds are different from hers. The long period she has spent living in the US and the fact that she, as a member of a second-generation family of Palestinian immigrants, has not experienced forced displacement first-hand as Manar has might have made it easier for her to show tolerance of cultural difference and to make the best of any social interaction she takes part in. Dwelling on this point in an article entitled "Singaporean and British transmigrants in China and the cultural politics of 'contact zones'" (2005), Brenda S. A. Yeah and Katie Willis note that living in contact zones weakens the impact culturally constructed stereotypes has on the individual. As contact zones act as "frontiers where 'difference' is constantly encountered and negotiated" (abstract), forming relations not filtered through those stereotypes becomes easier, a fact seen in the malleable personality Jubayna has developed as a second-generation immigrant living in America.

It is ironic that though airplane settings are expected to serve as ideal sites for contact zones, in reality, not all of them do. In the story, the airplane episode represents some of the features of the contact zone. Amongst the passengers Jubayna interacts with or notices during the flight are Brian, the American man who sits next to her, Clueless, a Palestinian-American businessman, Good Citizen, an Arab-American man, and an Asian woman. The plane episode starts off as a good example of a contact zone where cross-cultural interactions take place. Brian, for instance, starts off several short conversations on a myriad of topics, a thing that Jubayna does not seem to mind despite not feeling comfortable doing it. She is noticed to take part in those conversations, either by listening or by talking back,

despite the fact that some of them seem weird or uninteresting to her. It is during that interaction that a contact zone is established. Like Brian, Jubayna shares information about her culture, habits and behaviours, without trying to enforce any of them on the other. The rest of the plane episode, however, does not match its beginning. Part of it could be ascribed to the fact that Jubayna does not literally interact with the other passengers she notices till the end of the flight. She only observes what they are doing and figures from what they are saying or doing that they are both Arabs like her. The rest of the interaction is conducted virtually in Jubayna's mind based on pre-set perceptions, one of which is the all-Arabs – are – terrorists stereotype that the American part of her seems to take seriously.

Prior to the take off, Clueless is speaking loudly on the phone in Arabic, discussing what seems to Jubayna as a business transaction. Part of the failure to establish a contact zone here stems from Clueless' lack of awareness that those around him can hear his conversation, but cannot reciprocate it. In the story, Halaby tells the reader that Jubayna has had the inclination to ask him to lower his voice, but does not in fact do so. The same applies to the case of Good Citizen, whom Jubayna notices reading the Bible in the Arabic language. Here again, Jubayna filters that would-be interaction through a biased lens leading her to the conclusion that it does not really matter that the Arab man is reading the Bible as long as the letters on the front cover are written in Arabic. The only real interaction between Jubayna and the two Arab men takes place when they are about to leave the plane. The inconvenient comment Clueless gives on the blouse Jubayna is wearing is reciprocated by a curse word from her which she intentionally says in Arabic. The fact that Jubayna utters the word in Arabic can be seen as an attempt on her part to initiate an interaction where cultural differences are harmonized, especially that, as mentioned in the discussion above, Jubayna's American looks and her twelve-year stay in America have not made her more American than Arab. Nevertheless, that attempt on her part does not find a fruitful ground to prosper. As the three men, the American and the two Arabs, meet in the aisle after the plane lands, the kind of conversation they engage in gives Jubayna a diminutive role that it is only through what is written on her blouse that she can be accepted as an eligible participant in the interaction. Thus, compared to the more harmonized conversation she has had with the American Brian during the flight, this conversation is oriented by the gender component rather than the cultural component. This is not to deny the presence of a successful contact zone in which cultural differences are understood, accepted and selected from by the participants, but the success of the interaction taking place in that multicultural space is, to some extent, hindered by the domineering impact

the presence of the three male participants in the interaction has on the only female participant. This restricts her role as an eligible participant and puts her on defense, undercutting the interaction.

The same fluctuation is noticed on the part of the main character in Serageldin's "It's Not About That". The short story takes the form of a letter (not necessarily sent to the designated addressee), in which intimate thoughts are shared by its writer, an Egyptian-American woman called Nadia, and a close American-Jewish male friend on the impact their cultural and religious differences have had on their relationship. Early in the story, we are told that Nadia and the man have known each other for a long time. They have also exchanged and shared their thoughts on a number of topics, many of which have caused tension in their relationship. As with the airplane episode in "Hair, Prayer and Men", old and intimate relationships between individuals belonging to different cultures are expected to act as contact zones enabling them to develop a more malleable personality that accepts cultural difference without prejudice. This, however, does not seem to be the case in that relationship.

> It's not about that. It was never about that, between us, so when did it become about that? It was never about my being from Egypt and your being American, about our coming from opposite ends of the spectrum on almost every issue. A few months after we met, I wrote to you: "It's a miracle that we come from worlds so far apart, and met the way we did, and connect the way we do." I saw the distance between us better than you could, because I could see your starting point as well as mine. (275)

As we get more information about Nadia, however, we start to understand that their relationship is not as ideal as it seems to be, to both of them at least. Nadia is an Egyptian woman who has immigrated from Egypt to America, but who has witnessed life-changing events in the history of Egypt which she does not seem to have forgotten. The considerable period of time she has lived in the US has, no doubt, made her more eligible to start this relationship in the American sense. As she writes her words describing their relationship, she is wary enough of the fact that they barely share any memories, apart from those they shared at the university. Her memories about the Egyptian-Israeli War, the October War, the death of the Rais, the assassination of the Sadat are hard to intersect with his memories about the War in Vietnam and the "single mindedness" that, she is sure, "must have taken its toll on [his] marriage" (278) to establish a business. And though she knows that he

"demonstrated for civil rights, [he] had black friends" (277), she is still aware that he is a "card-carrying member of the ACLU" (277).

These hard-to-bring-together memories, however, do not block the space for interaction. In fact, Nadia explains that by the time she got used to the new lifestyle and people in America, there has been little "room in this brave new world for memories of Egypt" (278).[1] The good thing about Nadia, which she shares with Jubayna but not with Manar, is that she realizes that she should not stick blindly to what she has grown up to believe in, because it does not necessarily suit other people in other places. And this makes her, as Yeah and Willis (2005) explain, a potential candidate for successful cross-cultural interaction who is capable of forming relationships not blindly shaped by preconceived stereotypes. Like Jubayna, she does not mind overlooking some of the behaviours which are not acceptable to her as an Arab. In Prattian terms, Nadia exhibits the skill needed to survive in a contact zone. Unlike Manar who rejects the behaviours and habits of Americans regardless of their impact on her and her family, Nadia accepts the fact that other nations' behaviours and habits are different from hers. This point is emphasized by Ewa Bal who notes in "Knowing in Contact Zones" (2020), that the contingency of the encounters taking place in contact zones is what helps redefine many of the historically structured intercultural relations when "peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations," which, to go back to what Pratt says, "usually [involve] conditions of coercion, racial inequality, and intractable conflict" (2008b: 8). Thus, as Nadia engages in this relationship with one who is supposed to be an enemy, she focuses on moving on with the relationship rather than on making their interactions harmonious. This, it should be noted, is one thing that sets her apart from Jubayna. Nadia pressures herself to make the relationship last; she convinces herself that cultural differences can be overcome and that creating a utopian relationship in which no conflict is insurmountable is possible. That is why she is shocked every time her companion lets go of the harmonious tone she expects him to always use. Quite differently, Jubayna is hardly noticed to set any expectations in any of the

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1   Serageldin might be referring to her own experience after leaving Egypt and settling in the US. In a 2003 interview she explains, "I made a very different life for myself in which there was no room for my memories of another place and another time; I tried to blend in like a perfect chameleon. But whenever I returned to Egypt for extended visits, I saw such far-reaching changes sweeping the country, that it seemed to me the world I once knew would soon be gone with the wind. And that was the original impetus to set it all down on paper. But what may have begun as an exercise in "recollections in tranquility" as Wordsworth put it, soon became a very personal and painful attempt to reconcile my own present with my past."

interactions she engages with, whether it is with Americans or Arabs. And this shows that she is experienced enough to know that social survival in a multicultural setting is not conditioned by cultural erasure or cultural assimilation. Thus, while engaging in a harmonious interaction in such a setting requires adopting some habits and behaviours from the dominant culture, the individual is free to choose what suits him and to avoid what does not.

This misconception on the part of Nadia makes her suppose that cultural differences should not be brought to the surface in social interactions as they can wreck the stability of the relation. Nonetheless, and as Pratt (1991) explains in her study of multicultural educational settings as contact zones, the element of 'tension' is an essential component of the process. Having a group of individuals with diverse cultural backgrounds involved in a tension-free interaction either means that none of them understands that those with whom he is interacting are culturally different or that none of them takes that difference seriously enough to exert the needed effort to acknowledge it. Thus, though Jubayna's attempts at engaging in conversations which take into consideration the cultural differences of the other participants are undercut by her failure to overcome the stereotypical representations one culture has for another, she does not shy away from expressing how culturally different she is. Nadia, however, chooses to keep those differences hidden for the fear of them causing tension in the relationship. She even goes to the extent of avoiding communication with her friend in order to guard the relationship against any possible conflict. The ending of the story is where Nadia reaches a degree of self-realization. Calling her friend to make sure his son is safe after the World Trade Towers attacks in September 2001, she is shocked by how mean his generalizations are about all Muslims being terrorists. His attacks leave her speechless then, forgetting that what he said is fuelled by his cultural background, not by individual considerations. Unable to accept the truth that what her friend has said is not directed at her, she chooses to put an end to future interaction despite his repeated apologies.

> ... You said you never meant for me to take what you said personally; that you were willing to put aside our differences for the sake of our friendship. I know that. I know you wouldn't hurt me for the world, not in cold blood. I will always wish you well. But try to understand. We   have nothing left to talk about. This time, it is about that. (283)

The suddenness and harshness of her realization make her adopt a totally different

approach to their relationship, resembling in this sense Manar's approach in rejecting all that is different. It is at this point that Nadia comes to understand that communication between culturally diverse individuals should not repress those differences. Unfortunately, she learns the lesson the wrong way so that she refuses to see the tension that results from interacting with her Jewish friend as a healthy symptom of how harmonious the relationship is. Hence, she chooses to put an end to it.

Transculturation: Bridging the Two Ways

In Kaldas' "He Had Dreamed of Returning," the protagonist Nancy is not an Arab woman. She is American but is married to an Egyptian man, Hani. While the focus at the beginning of the story is on Hani who flees Egypt with his father and mother after his elder brother is killed in the war and who is able to adapt to life in America, it shifts to his wife after he decides to return to Egypt. Like Nadia, Hani is overwhelmed by memories of the war in Egypt, the death of his brother and the fear the family lived during that time. Nadia, however, lets go of those memories as she is taken by life in America, while Hani does not. And this is what pushes him into taking the decision of going back home despite the fact that he is leading a well-established life there. During the years he has lived in the US, he has showed wariness not to get too immersed in the new culture. Like Jubayna, he has demonstrated the ability to select what suits him as an Arab and to avoid what does not with no prejudice. And this, as Kaldas shows in the story, is what has made him succeed in the few relations he has formed with Americans there. As a student at school and at the university and even after graduation, he has established a limited number of relations; nevertheless, in the relations he formed he has demonstrated an ability to get himself acquainted with the cultural background of the individual with whom he is interacting without getting too involved in the relation to the extent of self-erasure. This is not to deny that he has faced difficulties socialising with Americans because of his Arab origins, but, unlike Manar and Nadia and more like Jubayna, he has proved to be a potential candidate for harmonious cross-cultural interaction.

Things, however, do not proceed as expected after his return to Egypt. He is shocked by how different from his relatives he has become. He is also shocked by the different ways relations are perceived in Egypt and the US. Contrary to the ease with which he has expected his interactions with his relatives in Egypt to proceed, he has found it really hard to try to understand and accept their behaviours and habits the way he has accepted those of Americans. At the time that he could accept

the American culture and select what suits him from it, he failed to do so in Egypt. The frequent visits of his relatives who have felt free to inquire about the details of his life, the nosy people he met at work and the illegal ways by which business transactions have been sometimes carried out there made it all the more difficult to turn any of those spaces of cross-cultural interaction into a contact zone. Like Manar, he eventually chooses to reject their difference as it threatens the stability of the identity he has come back home with. This rejection makes him all the more isolated from the people he has thought he has come back to. At work, he starts to lose the passion for what he has been doing for years in America, carrying out his daily tasks there in a robot-like manner.

It is in Egypt that the focus is shifted to his wife who shows more ability than he does to interact with culturally different individuals tolerantly there. To begin with, she does not object to her husband's decision to return to Egypt; contrary to his expectations, she welcomes the idea as one that will give her the chance to experience interacting with a culture different from hers. In Egypt, she embraces the Arab lifestyle and is able to transculture herself more than her Egyptian husband. In "Power, Social Marginality, and the Cultural Psychology of Identities at the Cultural Contact Zones" (2008), Ramaswami Mahalingam explains why individuals in the same social setting manage to form more successful relations cross-culturally at the time that others fail to. As those see the formation of identity as a two-way process of interaction between the culturally different groups in the same setting, they start to "reconfigure their identities and representations of culture" (abstract) transculturally. While in Egypt, Nancy is not annoyed as Hani is by the frequent family visits or by what the latter sees as the 'nosiness' of his relatives. During those visits, she listens carefully to what the women tell her about Egyptian traditions, dishes and history. She even starts to learn cooking the Egyptian way. Unlike her husband whose unexplained unwillingness to interact with his own people with whom he shares a lot, Nancy succeeds at turning every family meeting or work meeting into a contact zone where she could learn more about the new culture, adopt what suits her and accept what does not with no prejudice. It is ironic, in this sense, that for all the years she has spent living with her husband in America, she did not get to know about the Egyptian culture as much as she did in the short period of time she has spent in Egypt.

The story ends ironically with the husband's decision to go back to the US. His wife, however, rejects his decision this time and chooses to stay in Egypt. The opposite decisions they take makes the situation more ironic. Back in America, Hani has shown more ability to interact in a multicultural setting, a thing which he could

not do in the Egyptian society, which is supposed to be analogous to Anderson's imagined community with which he has a lot to share. The fact that for all those years in America he has been able to interact with people of different cultural backgrounds and has not expected to find much in common between himself and them has taught him to accept difference, selecting from it what he sees suitable and rejecting what does not. In Egypt, he feels overwhelmed with how little differences he finds between himself and his relatives and this leaves him with no choice but to have to adopt all their habits and behaviors, which is a thing he has not been used to back in America. This explains why he decides to go back to the US. His wife, likewise, welcomes the idea of accepting cultural difference and this helps her turn the different cross-cultural interactions she engages in into contact zones in Egypt. In fact, this is observed early in the story as she was getting to know her husband before their marriage. In Egypt, this multicultural space becomes wider and more diversified, giving her the chance to get exposed to the culture and the lifestyle there, to choose what to adopt and to reject what she does not want to tolerantly. Eventually, and despite the fact that each chooses to live in a different country, both prove able to interact in multicultural spaces as they realize that such diversity gives them more space to choose, rather than limit their choices to what they have culturally become familiar with. This point of intersection between the partners is highlighted by Nisreen Sawwa and Shadi Neimneh (2017), who argue in an article studying the effects of exile in two short stories by Kaldas that both Hani and Nancy are able to arrive at self-actualization in the countries they immigrate to (207-209).

Conclusion

The fact that the four authors come from different Arab countries does, no doubt, affect their perception and, thus, their representation of the different interactions taking place between the individuals or groups belonging to different cultures in the short stories. Nevertheless , the personal experience the authors share as individuals living in the US and interacting with white Americans and the different ethnic groups in the American society has enabled them to see the larger picture with a minimum degree of prejudice and to understand the feelings usually caused by such clashes to be able to represent them objectively and accurately. Thus, as the discussion above has shown, the four authors' perception of spaces of cross-cultural interaction in America today is not identical; it differs from one short story to another and from one character to another in the same story. Some characters, like Jubayna and Nancy, manage to understand the inevitability of those clashes, and are, therefore, more capable of developing a degree of awareness to enable

them to deal with difference not as a source of threat but as a source of diversity. Those characters, when viewed in light of Pratt's understanding of the contact zone, are able to employ the arts needed in those spaces to benefit the most from those interactions and to make that experience a successful one. Other characters such as Manar, on the other hand, mistake the purpose behind engaging in cross-cultural interactions and start seeing the clashes resulting from them as win-or-lose scenarios. Those individuals are in most cases fuelled by extreme feelings of belongingness and a fixed form of identity, which makes them identify any difference as a source of threat to the stability they derive from their cultural rootedness. Unlike the first kind, they lack the basic arts of the contact zone. A third category, represented in Nadia, still remains. Here, individuals waver between acceptance and rejection. They do realize that absolute rejection of difference is not the correct solution, and thus, without the needed level of awareness, venture blindly into assimilating themselves into the new culture, thinking that by doing so they can manage to overcome those clashes peacefully and gain social acceptance. In their case, the peaceful resolution of those clashes lasts for a short period of time, after which the conflict is initiated anew, more aggressively this time. Unfortunately, those individuals exhibit a degree of knowledge about the arts needed in a contact zone, but they fail, due to past memories usually associated with the home country or to social or political conditions taking place there, to maintain a peaceful treatment of those conflicts. That is why the process of transculturation, in their case, is usually truncated leaving them with feelings of frustration.

The three categories of individuals are observed in the four short stories understudy, with sometimes one story bringing together characters belonging to more than one category at the same time. This diversity on the part of the four authors reflects an awareness that individual reactions in multicultural spaces vary, as the characters acquire a higher level of maturity every time they face a new conflict. And this emphasizes the need to view those interactions as part of an ongoing process in which one's attitudes change and mature to make the best out of that experience. It also shows that the four authors realize the importance of the role of contact zones in creating the harmony needed in multicultural societies. Their personal experience, as immigrants who have spent a relatively long period of time in the US, their awareness that extreme feelings fuelled by complete rejection or assimilation into the mainstream culture is self-destructive, and their globalized perception of human relations as relations which should transcend geographically and culturally defined boundaries have contributed to shaping their attitudes to what is culturally foreign in their stories, making it more inclusive and less culturally prejudiced.

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