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Resisting the Allure: The West as Fiction in the Arab Immigrant Novel

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Abstract: This article investigates the resemblance between the Arab immigrant experience in the Arab immigrant novel, on the one hand, and the experience of fiction reading, on the other one. The article analyzes Tayeb Salih's *Season of migration to the north* (1966), Waguih Ghali's *Beer in the snooker club* (1964), Walid Al Hajjar's trilogy *The search for the self* (published privately in 1973, 1979, and 1984), Leila Aboulela's *The translator* (1999), and Alaa Al Aswany's *Chicago: A novel* (2007) to demonstrate the presence of a pattern depicting the experience of Arab immigrants as akin to fiction reading. Drawing from genre, postcolonial, and diasporic studies, this project argues that the West, for the Arab immigrant characters, shares many of the features of fiction: its emotional distance, authority, the privacy of its experience, the space it allows for role playing, and its allowance or requirement of a temporary reinvention of the self. Such characteristics, the project shows, illuminate our understanding of significant issues such as the integration of Arab immigrants into Western countries and their sense of home and belonging. While these characteristics comprise the lure of the fictional West, they also account for its oppression and exclusion. The Arab immigrant characters who find the prolonged fictional experience of the West painful respond to the agony of this experience through violence—to depart from the Western experience altogether or to settle for it despite its unpleasantness—or through the establishment of a native, home religion in the receiving Western countries.
Keywords: Arab immigrant literature, diasporic literature, Alaa Al Aswany, Tayeb Salih, Leila Aboulela, Walid Al Hajjar.

Philosopher and self-identified exile Edward Said writes, "the exile's new world, logically enough, is unnatural and its unreality resembles fiction" (Said, 2000, pp. 181). The experience of exile, Said explains, is characterized by "estrangement" and "alienation" from "the nourishment of tradition, family, and geography" (Said, 2000, p. 173–174). It is also characterized by solitude, loss, and loneliness (Said, 2000, p. 179–180). By the same token, citing prominent literary historian and critic Georg Lukács, Said contends that the novel is marked by "transcendental homelessness" (2000, p. 181). While classical epics "emanate from settled cultures, in which values are clear, identities stable, life unchanging," the European novel, Said asserts, "is grounded in precisely the opposite experience, that of a changing society" (Said, 2000, p. 181). Said further emphasizes this notion in his book *Beginnings* where he maintains that the novel entails the "desire to create an alternative world, to modify or augment the real world" (Said, 1975, p. 81). For Said, both experiences—that of exile and fiction alike—are born out of estrangement from a stable home.

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This estrangement of the exile from home is not unlike the loss and displacement experienced by other categories of immigrants. As a variety of scholars of diasporic studies note, the term "exile" overlaps with immigrant, diasporic, refugee, and émigré in literature and culture. For example, Madelaine Hron (2009) claims that "boundaries between immigrant, involuntary migrant, refugee and exile are often blurred" (p. 14). These categories are not distinct or clear. James Clifford points out that diaspora and immigration can entail longing, memory, and (dis)identification as well as nostalgia, loss and displacement (Clifford, 1994, p. 314–315), much like in the case of exile. Also, both exilic and diasporic writings involve a "rhetoric of displacement" (Israel, 2000, p. ix). Such categories of immigration are sometimes so indistinguishable that Walter Connor defines diaspora broadly as "that segment of a people living outside the homeland" (Connor, 1986, p. 16). The term "immigrant" has in common with "exile," "diasporic," and "refugee" a sense of loss, dislocation, alienation, and displacement, but these characteristics make the immigrant experience similar to its exilic counterpart and, in turn, similar to that of fiction. Immigrants feel a deep sense of estrangement from home, similar to the estrangement of the genre of the novel from home.

A careful consideration of Said's comparison between exile and fiction in terms of homelessness – and the subsequent feelings of loss, displacement, estrangement, and alienation – shows that the equivalency can be extended to the experience of immigrants in its likeness to fiction as well. Said's metaphor could be expanded to mean that the experience of immigrants and diasporic subjects is comparable to the experience of a reader of a fictional text. If, as Said has previously explained, works of fiction offer their readers alternative conceptual worlds and present them with modified, augmented realms, then that is precisely what immigrants face in countries of immigration: new worlds vastly different from their own.

The equivalency between the immigrant experience and fiction reading in terms of alienation and estrangement is significant as it corresponds to a salient motif in Arab immigrant literature which emphasizes the struggle to integrate in the West. Therefore, such a comparison between the immigrant experience and that of fiction reading merits a close examination, as its implications prove to be pervasive for Arab immigrant literature. In fact, utilizing this framework in investigating Arab immigrant literature reveals that the Arab immigrant novel abounds with images of the interaction with the West as similar to the experience of a person reading a fictional text. This resemblance has important implications for Arab immigrants and the Arab immigrant novel in terms of integration into Western cultures, as well as the paradox of both the appeal of the West and its repulsiveness. This investigation of Arab immigrant fiction also divulges further aspects and dimensions of the fictional experience of the West initially discussed or alluded to by Edward Said.

The discussion of the West as akin to fiction reading in the Arab immigrant novel emerges from a close analysis of a variety of literary texts by renowned Arab immigrant novelists: Tayeb Salih's *Season of migration to the north* (1966), Leila Aboulela's *The translator* (1999), Alaa Al Aswany's *Chicago: A novel* (2007), Waguih Ghali's *Beer in the snooker club* (1964), and Walid Al Hajjar's privately published trilogy *The search for the self* (published in 1973, 1979, and 1984). These novels supplement each other in expounding the view of the West as similar to the experience of reading fiction. In my analysis, I capitalize on postcolonial, diasporic, and fiction studies. My reading of these novels shows that the immigrant experience in the West is similar to the experience of a person reading a fictional text in terms of the lure of the experience, its privacy, emotional detachment, role playing, and the temporary re-invention of the self. However, it also shows that the same elements that make the West attractive lead to pain for the immigrant characters. Through violence at points and through the use of certain discursive practices at others,

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some of the characters reject the fiction of the West or even seek to change it into an accommodating reality. Implementing the metaphor of the West as akin to fiction reading is important to Arab diasporic studies because it informs our understanding of the challenge of integration into Western countries, as well as the paradox of their lure and pain.

The West vs Fiction: A Theoretical Framework

The parallel between the West and fiction reading goes beyond the elements of dislocation, loss, and displacement. For centuries, the West has constituted a fascinating space in Arab literature and culture(s), a geography upon which Arab culture(s) project some of their dreams, ideals, hopes and desires—though exceptions do exist. This section reviews perceptions of the West which are well-established in Arab diasporic literature and reflect patterns of perception found in Arab women's and Arab men's writings across the Arab world. Many of these views lay the theoretical foundation for the perception of the West as a fictional space. Assertions about viewpoints are neither absolute nor universal; they are rather dynamic.

Pioneers of Arab studies Albert Hourani and Ibrahim Abu-Lughod place the beginning of the current Arab interest in European and Western cultures in the eighteenth century, around the time of the Scientific Revolution. Hourani (1962) claims that such an awareness of the advancement of the West emerged when the Ottomans who ruled the Arab world or parts of it "could no longer fight the [European] Powers on equal terms" (p. 39). Abu-Lughod concurs by saying that the arrival of the French in Egypt in 1798 "was a demonstration of European might which the Arab subjects of the decaying Ottoman-Mamluk system could neither ignore nor comprehend" (Abu-Lughod, 1963, p. 11). Though adversarial at times, such interactions with and awareness of European progress and power turned the European other into a model to follow and started a new, positive image of the West in the Arab world. The fact that the Arab world could not compete with, fathom, or comprehend the new advances in the Western world turned the latter into a model and a favorable space conducive to the imagination. The West became the future one should look forward to and ought to catch up with. This view of the auspicious, imaginative West has persisted in Arab literature as well.

Consistent with this assessment is Rasheed El-Enany's comprehensive study *Arab representations of the occident: East-west encounters in Arabic fiction*. In his book, El-Enany discusses the topic of the fascination or the infatuation with the West, as a reverse study of Said's *Orientalism*. In this pursuit, he covers periods, writers, and novelists starting in the eighteenth century and ending in the twenty-first century. Though he acknowledges the exceptions to his conclusion, El-Enany (2006) says, "Arab intellectuals have displayed a very rational and appreciative attitude toward Western culture" (p. 2) and that "much of the Occidentalist images explored [in his book] will be seen to have been about the idealization of the [Western] other, the quest for the other, the desire to become the other, or at least to become like the other" (El-Enany, 2006, p. 7). The enticing perception of the West as well as the idealization of its achievements and accomplishments lays the groundwork for establishing it as an imaginative space which helps the observer project their dreams and desires upon it. Echoing this idyllic perception of the West, for example, Fadia Faqir's heroine Salma, in her novel *My name is Salma* (2007), thinks that in Scotland she would find "milk and honey streaming down the streets, [or] happiness lurking in every corner" (Faqir, 2007, p. 150). The Western hemisphere is a paradise of sorts, a place where wishes come true. It is attractive because it is conducive to the imagination. This quality of the West is not unlike the lure of fiction reading.

Moving from the imaginative world of the West to the imaginative world of fiction reading, we see that they are similar: they are both inviting and conducive to the projection of wishes, desires, and hopes. Scholar of fiction studies Mark J. P. Wolf (2012) calls the imaginary worlds of fiction "beckoning vistas" that "invite us to enter" them (p. 1-2). Doreen Maitre confirms Wolf's view, explaining that fiction can present the reader with some of his or her most basic ideals and desires such as power, success and sexual relationships (Maitre, 1983, p. 72). Maitre justifies the inviting nature of fictional worlds by their ability to offer the readers a space where they can project their dreams and desires. This projection is also assisted by the notion that "[t]hrough acts of narration, creators of stories produce blueprints for world construction" (David Herman et. al., 2012, p. 17). Worlds of fiction are not closed systems; they are blueprints that allow the reader/observer to imaginatively fill in many of their spaces in accordance with one's desires and wishes. By the same token, the Western advances and progress seen in the Arab world serve as a blueprint for a world that can be filled in imaginatively by a distant observer. The manifestations of the West turn it into a promising world, where the observer can imagine stories of success and prosperity.

The allure of fiction reading also consists in giving the reader a break from the mundane reality of everyday life. John Yandell explains that fiction reading is a moment of "solitariness," where the book is "a means of escaping the unpleasant reality of the world" (Yandell, 2012, pp. 283–284). Fiction reading is a private, solitary experience that grants the reader a respite from the difficult reality of one's immediate surroundings. Further proof of this notion comes from renowned literary critic and scholar of fiction studies Ian Watt, who explains that "ceasing to be conscious of the printed page before our eyes we surrender ourselves entirely to the world of illusion the novel describes. This effect is heightened by the fact that we are usually alone when we read, and that the book, for the time being, becomes a kind of extension of our personal [or private] lives" (Watt, 1957, p. 198). The notion that we read fiction alone, relatively away from communal, familial or societal presence, frees us as readers to temporarily lose our societal commitments or any commitment to public discourses through which we communicate with our communal surroundings. This solitary act liberates us from any commitment to community, family, or friends to focus rather on our personal desires and wishes. It is such imaginative needs for privacy and individuality—and the pertinent break from one's communal setting—that the West corresponds to and promises to offer but in a lived, embodied capacity.

It is with such imaginative expectations that many immigrants approach the issue of immigrating to Western countries. This imaginative projection serves as an escape from the home culture and collective, where one enters this new world alone. When some Arabs decide to immigrate, they do so because they partly view the West as an "escape" (Fadda-Conrey, 2009, p. 179; Suyoufie & Hammad, 2009, p. 273), a motif present in Arab immigrant culture and literature. This imaginative projection and movement away from the Arab collective entails a movement towards the private and the individualistic. Immigrants in the West experience a certain amount of privacy, individuality, and escape, which might not be as readily available in their Arab abode. Immigration, in this sense, becomes a movement away from what is collective and familiar; it is a movement away from familiar norms, practices, morals, laws, people, languages, and religions, of which immigrants are part. This distance from the home culture suggests the possibility of a break from the mundane cultural collective.

The West is similar to fiction in terms of the lure and privacy of both experiences, but the West is also similar to fiction reading in terms of the distance it keeps from Arab immigrants – which is similar to the distance maintained between a fictional text and its reader. Even after immigrating, distance and differences persist. Although the physical distance is abridged between

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the West and Arab immigrants, other types of distances and differences remain: linguistic, religious, cultural, social and so on. Those differences can result in exclusion, which is a common motif in Arab exilic and diasporic writings (Al Maleh, 2009; Hout, 2009). That distance is reinforced by "Anti-Arab racism," which only got worse after 9/11, as Steven Salaita (2007, p. 111) repeatedly claims. Moreover, Syrine Hout (2009, p. 147) acknowledges that both exilic and diasporic Arab writings emphasize displacement and the difficulty of fitting one's identity in the new country. The immigrant's identity with its differences is excluded and unaccommodated. The West does not offer Arab immigrants the cultural environment they associate with their home cultures. While this exclusion proves to be hurtful in the long term, it is initially conducive to the imagination and to perceiving the West as similar to fiction reading.

Many immigrants may not be willing to completely integrate into the new Western societies either. Much like other immigrant communities that "struggle to assert identity out of place" (Israel, 2000, p. ix) in exilic and diasporic writings, some Arab immigrants show the same unwillingness to bridge that distance and some of those differences. The escape the West provides after immigration can sometimes be viewed as a sojourn and not as an attempt to forgo the first cultural collective altogether. Like fiction, the West is expected to be a sojourn, a non-confining space, along with the perceived safety and security of the home culture in the motherland. After all, home "should remain a familiar and unadulterated territory of belonging" (Zhang, 2007, p. 35), despite the temporary break and escape immigrants need from the homeland. It is as if immigrants could go back home any time and pick up where they left off. Paul White illustrates this view when he states that "amongst all the literature of migration the highest proportion deals in some way with ideas of return, whether actualized or remaining imaginary" (White, 1995, p. 14). This desire to return home implies that the West is perceived as a temporary journey or a sojourn for many immigrants. Nicolas Kanellos rightly points out that the attempts made by Hispanic immigrants to preserve their language and culture in the diaspora has the premise of the return to the motherlands embedded in it (Kanellos, 2011, p. 8). By the same token, the preservation of the language and culture by many immigrant communities, including Arab immigrants, indicates (the desire for) a possible return to the homeland, whether actualized or remaining imaginary. The West is an escape that nonetheless maintains the perceived security of the home culture in the country of origin.

This relative distance characterizes the experience of fiction reading as well. Gregory Currie states that imaginary and fictional worlds have the ability to grant the reader a "vicarious" position (Currie, 1990, p. 19). Works of fiction grant the reader a certain distance through the latter's lack of involvement in the events being narrated. The "vicarious" position the reader occupies is another word for "being a spectator" (Appleyard, 1991, p. 104). Any involvement is only imaginary, and the reader is free to leave at any time; they need not commit to the trip. There is the perception and the promise of a return to reality at any point due to the distance maintained between the reader and the text. The immigrant is at a distance from the West in a fashion similar to that of a reader of a fictional text. Leila Aboulela's novel *The translator* is a case in point. When describing her experience in Scotland, the heroine Sammar feels that her expression is very limited, as "when she spoke to people, they seemed wary, on their guard, as if any minute she would say something out of place, embarrassing" (Aboulela, 1999, p. 6). She characterizes her experience as "silent" because she is intimidated by the surprised looks she receives from the Scots: "She had to be silent. Use her teeth and lips to be silent" (Aboulela, 1999, p. 40). She feels that she cannot participate in or be part of Scottish society. In effect, she stays at a distance from this society, excluded and unwelcome: a spectator, an observer, and a listener. This spectatorship is similar to that of a reader of a fictional text who does not have the ability to contribute to the text or alter its

events. Though, in this instance, distance is oppressive, the cultural distance from the West initially contributes to its appealing, fictional nature.

Another important gap resulting from this cultural distance and differences is the relative emotional detachment from the new environment—which is similar to the experience of fiction reading. Psychologists Dacher Keltner, Keith Oatley and Jennifer Jenkins argue that emotions are inseparable from values. Identity, in turn, is inseparable from emotions and is intertwined with deeply-rooted feelings. Acting upon a character or an identity different from one's own might require a certain amount of emotional detachment. David Cowart argues that immigrants "must somehow wring substance from the decidedly un-ludic role-playing disguise" (Cowart, 2006, p. 56). In other words, immigrants have to play roles in which they need to hide behind emotional facades. If the roles they play in the West are different from their true identities, then these new performances won't reflect the emotions they truly feel, since their true emotions are tied to the values and beliefs encoded in their true identities and not in the performances they present. Although the suppression of emotional expression can be hurtful in the long run, it can be initially appealing for immigrants who enjoy exploring new, temporary performances in the host countries. This emotional distance can temporarily relieve immigrants of the emotional responsibility to the native collective.

The relative emotional distance that many immigrants feel in the West is similar to the relative emotional detachment from a text of fiction. The distance, the non-actual status of a work of fiction, and feeling shielded from the events of a text can create a relative emotional buffer zone. Gerald Cupchik rightly argues that "the properties of works of art is that they can prompt emotions at a certain distance—called an aesthetic distance—neither too close so that they overwhelm us nor too distant so that they do not affect us" (Oatley, 2011, p. 125). Even though the reader might emotionally respond to a fictional text, they can still feel relatively removed from it. As Keith Oatley argues, even if the reader empathizes or sympathizes with a fictional character, he or she will still feel "immunized" or shielded from the trouble or any negative consequences on themselves (Oatley, 2011, p. 119). The experience of fiction reading offers the reader the chance to imaginatively perform new roles through empathy and/or sympathy, and explore new extensions of oneself or new possibilities for the self, since the experience is emotionally safe to undertake without major consequence.

In the imaginative world of fiction and its non-actual status, being a spectator is not the only role the reader can assume. Participation of the reader is a form of role playing. Maitre (1983) argues that the reader can participate in a work of fiction "both as himself and by identifying with the various characters" (p. 16). For her, this participation is possible through sympathy and/or empathy where the reader can "put *oneself* in the *place* of another," as he or she "remains imprisoned in his [or her] own identity with its concomitant attitudes and beliefs" (Maitre, 1983, p. 16) – or "*become* another," assuming the "states of consciousness" of the characters (Maitre, 1983, p. 16). The reader can imaginatively participate and still remain at a distance. Yet, this participation implies a temporary reinvention of the self by putting oneself imaginatively in the place of another or becoming another. Part of the pleasure of fiction reading is predicated on the ability to imaginatively and temporarily reinvent oneself. In fact, Lisa Zunshine (2006) claims that the pleasure and enjoyment of reading fiction are derived from "pretend play" and "trying out mental states" (p. 17). This "pretend play" is a form of imaginative temporary role playing or temporary reinvention of the self, as if this process innately pleases the performer by giving them a break from themselves or their long-term identities. We see a similar notion of a temporary role-playing or reinvention of the self in Salih's *Season of migration to the north* and Al Hajjar's trilogy *The search for the self*. Both transnational subjects Mustafa Saeed of *Season* and Firas in Walid Al

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Hajjar's trilogy adopt temporary characters and engage in role-playing, where the former becomes "Hassan," "Charles," "Amin," and "Richard" (Salih 31)—while Firas becomes "Maxim" and Maximilano." As we will see in the next section, both characters derive pleasure from reinventing themselves. It is this fiction-like experience which leads Firas to claim, " كأنني تركت الحقيقة و الواقع لغيري من الناس " 'as if I left reality behind for other people to experience' (Al Hajjar, 1979, p. 48, my translation). It is this fiction-like experience in the West which temporarily frees him from a more persistent, lasting identity.

The West as Fiction in the Arab Immigrant Novel

Exploring multiple Arab immigrant literary texts reveals the pervasiveness of this notion of the West as similar to the experience of fiction reading. In order to understand the parallel and similarity between the two experiences, I analyze novels that expound this notion: Tayeb Salih's *Season of migration to the north* (1966), Waguih Ghali's *Beer in the snooker club* (1964), Alaa Al Aswany's *Chicago: A novel* (2007), and Walid Al Hajjar's trilogy *The search for the self* (published privately in 1973, 1979, and 1984). These literary texts supplement each other in demonstrating the notion of the Arab immigrant's Western experience as similar to fiction reading. These novels show that the immigrant characters experience the West as a private space, where the immigrants attempt to maintain a separation between the home and host countries' cultures. In addition, this notion of the West as similar to fiction reading can be inferred from the cultural and emotional distance experienced by the immigrant characters toward the new cultural environment. Furthermore, immigrant characters perceive the West as a space where the temporary reinvention of the self is possible. The West is attractive, inviting, and alluring in part because of the aforementioned experiences and elements, which are inextricably connected.

Privacy, Escape, and Dreams

Alaa Al Aswany's *Chicago: A novel* depicts the lives of two generations of Egyptians living in the United States and offers multiple, independent narratives and plot lines that seldom intersect. *Chicago*'s character Dr. Ra'fat Thabit makes a notable contribution to the field of Arab American and Arab immigrant literature as his story offers a critical narrative of pained integration for the Egyptian national. The novel better represents the notion of the separation between cultural spaces. Dr. Ra'fat Thabit who has lived in the United States for three decades, did not return home since he left for the United States. After immigrating to the United States, Dr. Thabit refuses to speak Arabic and even thinks in English (Al Aswany, 2007). With the exception of Dr. Muhammad Salah, Dr. Thabit turns down the company of Egyptians and even discriminates against them when it comes to admissions into the histology department at the University of Illinois at Chicago (Al Aswany, 2007). He thinks of himself as an American and attempts to act like one at every turn. From this brief description, it is apparent that Dr. Thabit strives to neatly order and compartmentalize his life before and after immigration. Dr. Thabit realizes that keeping the Egyptian collective distant is important for his fantasies of an American lifestyle. Just like in fiction reading, his experience in America is solitary by choice, isolated from an Egyptian community. However, this seemingly desired American lifestyle is close to an unrealistic fantasy due to his inability to adopt such a lifestyle despite its allure.

In spite of his assertions that "I am American. I have raised my daughter with American values" (Al Aswany, 2007, p. 53), he resists his daughter's relationship with her boyfriend. Dr. Thabit entertains and accepts the idea of pre-marital relationships for his daughter much like a

fiction reader entertains an idea theoretically. Yet, in reality, the narrator understands that "Ra'fat's problem, however, was [that]…he could not bear the idea of his daughter having a relationship outside marriage, for despite his harangues in defense of Western culture, he still had the mentality of the Eastern man he attacked and mocked" (Al Aswany, 2007, p. 55). Ian Watt (1957) argues that readers of fiction "surrender [themselves] entirely to the world of illusion the novel describes" (p. 198). They give in to fantasies. According to Watt (1957), these illusions, fantasies, or imaginative projections are facilitated by the "the fact that we are usually alone when we read" (p. 198), which is what Dr. Thabit tries to do: to be alone, away from Egypt, and to give in to new visions and fantasies in his private life in America.

Dr. Thabit ultimately fails to establish this clear line between both countries, since completely separating reality from fiction might be insurmountable. In her commentary on *Chicago,* Delphine Pages-El Karoui's (2016) claims, "[the novel] demonstrates the force of attachment to the native country . . . seem[s] to deny the possibility of an identity of both 'here' and 'there'" (p. 454). It is possible for imaginary and fictional worlds to influence the real world and vice versa. Maitre (1983) argues that the relationship between fictional and actual worlds is marked by "openness and fluidity"; it is an "interactive" relationship (p. 53). By the same token, Dr. Thabit's Egyptian reality influences his American fantasies. Though the complete separation between the private/fictional and the collective/real is unreasonable, Dr. Thabit is drawn to the prospect and promise of its plausibility. That is, in part, what constitutes the allure of America for Dr. Thabit: the perceived ability to use America as an escape from Egypt and to neatly organize one's life before and after immigration. America for Dr. Thabit is perceived as a new beginning, and in his case it can count as an attempted, extended break or escape from his Egyptian reality, Arab worldviews, and "Eastern" values.

The lure of the West is also evident in *Chicago* through its perception by the Egyptian characters as a technologically advanced place. For example, prior to leaving for the United States, Dr. Muhammad Salah explains to Zeinab, his Egyptian sweetheart, that Egypt is no match for the United States technologically or militarily (Al Aswany, 2007). He views the United States as superior to Egypt in these respects, clearly confirming Robbert Woltering's (2011) concept of the "benign West" (p. 40), where the West, including the United States, is an example to be followed in matters of justice, equality, democracy, science, technology, and material wealth. The United States is endowed with authority that derives from its progress and advancement, which in turn makes it more attractive to potential immigrants. His friend and fellow Egyptian Dr. Ra'fat Thabit is not different in that respect: "[He] has absolute pride in everything American" (Al Aswany, 2007, p. 29). Oftentimes, Dr. Thabit taunts Egyptian students in the histology department about how backward Egypt is in comparison to the United States, showing his fascination with America though in a self-flagellating manner. Similarly, in the eyes of many readers, texts of fiction are endowed with similar authority. The authority of fictional works comes in part, according to Ian Watt (1957), from the "authority of print – the impression that all that is printed is necessarily true" (p. 197). In other words, fiction draws some of its readers with the promise of knowledge. Antonella Ghersetti argues that although the impressions of the characters of Al Aswany's novel eventually change, the characters view America as a "utopian" place (Ghersetti, 2012, p. 295). Characters such as Dr. Salah and Dr. Thabit initially idealize America to a utopian level, but utopia is a fictional construct all together.

The same motif of the lure of the fictional West can be observed in Waguih Ghali's *Beer in the snooker club* as well. The novel begins with Ram and his friend drinking at a pub in Cairo while reminiscing about Ram's years in England. The novel narrates the story of Ram who is torn between his Egyptian identity and English education in Egypt, an education that leaves him craving

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life in England. Ram, who spends a few years in England, returns to Egypt, but the struggle between his Egyptian-ness and love for England persists. Before leaving for Europe, Ghali's protagonist Ram entertains and discusses the idea of departure to Europe. He begins to dream:

> The world of ice and snow in winter and red, slanting roof-tops was beginning to call us. The world of intellectuals and underground metros and cobbled streets and a green countryside which we had never seen, beckoned to us. The world where students had rooms, and typists for girl-friends, and sang songs and drank beer in large mugs, shouted to us. A whole imaginary world. A mixture of all the cities of Europe. (p. 55)

This monolithic entity that Ram fantasizes about is inviting and "beckon[ing]" just like a work of fiction. The lure of Europe makes Ram think that "life is in Europe" (Ghali, 1964, p. 56). In fact, much like a work of fiction, it is "a whole imaginary world." Ram states that it is a world "we had never seen." It is a world that Ram and his friends only heard about. It is a new journey and a break from Egypt for the protagonist and his crew. There is no doubt that Europe's allure is supported by Europe's reputation for advancement, technology, intellectual writings, and so on, but this effect is also heightened by the spectatorship and distance of Ram and his friends. This vicarious position, where Ram experiences or interacts with Europe at a distance, makes Europe more alluring. Much like in a work of fiction, Europe, the alluring world that comes with the promise of no entanglement or commitment, is fuzzy and, therefore, attractive because it offers a blueprint Ram and his friends can project their desires and wishes onto.

Emotional Detachment

Beyond privacy, the separation of spaces, and the projection of dreams and desires, the experience of fiction reading and the West have more characteristics in common. Mustafa Sa'eed of *Season of migration to the north* suggests that this experience of the West is marked by an emotional distance, where the immigrant might feel emotionally detached from the host culture. The novel presents the Sudanese character Mustafa Sa'eed who leaves for England to pursue his education. Mustafa Sa'eed spends long years in England, gets an education, pursues multiple relationships, commits a crime, and serves a 7-year sentence, before he returns to Sudan to marry, establish a family and settle down. The reader learns that Mustafa Sa'eed was emotionless as a child (Salih, 1969). Several references to him being "as cold as a field of ice" (Salih, 1969, p. 20) appear in the novel. Mustafa Sa'eed is incapable of sympathizing with people. He does not cry when his own mother dies. Mustafa Sa'eed is emotionless and seeks to nurture this side. His unemotional nature looks for and finds refuge in England.

This nature seems to have found its "calling" and a natural place in the West, namely England: "Here, too, was a desert laid out in blue-green, calling me, calling me. The mysterious call led me to the coast of Dover," Mustafa Sa'eed says (Salih, 1969, p. 24). "Mustafa Sa'eed is attracted to England because it accommodates his emotionlessness, helping him attain a pleasurable and satisfying aesthetic experience" (Murad, 2018, p. 214). After all, the lure of the country consists in part in its accommodation of Sa'eed's emotional detachment. This experience of emotional distance that Mustafa Sa'eed finds accommodated in England is not unlike the emotional distance the reader experiences while reading a text of fiction, since the reader feels "immunized" or shielded from the consequences of any events taking place in the text (Oatley, 2011, p. 119). In the end, the reader is a "spectator," occupying a "vicarious" position. Similarly, Mustafa Sa'eed is excluded from and not well-integrated into English society. The accommodation of his emotional

detachment, which initially attracts Mustafa Sa'eed to England persists as he does not become an integral part of England after immigration either.

Samar Attar (2010) rightly characterizes Saeed's relationship to England as a "love/hate" relationship (p. 139). He is close and distant at the same time. People such as Isabella Seymour, were having private affairs with him. Seymour, a married woman with two children, did not intend to have a relationship with Mustafa Sa'eed publicly. For her, Mustafa Sa'eed is a private fantasy and a story that cannot be shared with the community. However, even when Ann Hammond, another of his affairs and a student of oriental languages at Oxford, informs her parents of her marriage plans to Mustafa Sa'eed, her father expresses his disapproval and suspicion of the success of this potential marriage (Salih, 1969). Furthermore, Jean Morris, who marries him has an unclear family background (Salih, 1969). Mustafa Sa'eed never meets her family—neither does he know anything about them. Eventually, she will be the cause of his departure and deportation from England. As Musa Al-Halool (2008) asserts, for Mustafa Sa'eed, "alienation is inescapable and cannot be surmounted by crossing the border between the alien North and the native South" (p. 36).

However, to say that English women were in relationships with him privately is not to exonerate him and place the blame solely on them for his exclusion. The lack of a genuine effort to integrate on Mustafa Sa'eed's part indicates his realization of the usefulness of such an excluding society because it is a society that cannot commit him emotionally. Mustafa Sa'eed's actions indicate that to nurture an emotional side community is essential and that is why he remains on the fringes of the English society to which he travels. *Season's* protagonist shows that England, much like a work of fiction, can afford the immigrant or traveler an emotional break where they do not need to take emotional responsibility for their presence.

Roleplay and the Reinvention of the Self

The lure of the West, its privacy, and emotional distance also facilitate the (temporary) reinvention of the self. In Waguih Ghali's *Beer in the snooker club* the potential for role playing and performance in the West is realized prior to travelling. Ghali's novel has direct references to the lives of its main characters as fictional. The epigraph of the novel itself is a quote from Dostoevsky's *Notes from the underground* (1864): "Rather we aim at being personalities of a general, fictitious type." Choosing this quote by Dostoevsky is not arbitrary at all. This epigraph to a transnational novel suggests that the West, or England in this case, can assist the immigrant in achieving the purpose of becoming a fictitious character.

Ghali records the impressions of Font, Ram, and friends, Egyptian men and women, who travel to and live in England for a few years. While debating the idea of going to Europe with Edna, his girlfriend, Ram says, "I wanted to live. . . .I wanted to have affairs with countesses and to fall in love with a barmaid and to be a gigolo, and to be a political leader and to win at Monte Carlo and . . . to be an artist and to be elegant and also in rags" (Ghali, 1964, p. 55). Europe is viewed not only as a world of pleasure but also of performances and characters where Ram can reinvent his character(s) and play a multiplicity of roles. Ram's aspiration to find a European venue for the performance of new roles, which is tantamount to a reinvention of the self, suggests that he realizes the difficulty of such a transformation in Egypt. Maitre explains that the reader can imaginatively participate "both as himself and by identifying with various characters" (1983, p. 16). By the same token, Ram imaginatively projects onto Europe performances he believes will be made possible in and by Europe. England, he surmises, can afford him the distance and the detachment from himself

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to create a new persona, similar to when a person reads a work of fiction and engages in "empathetic identification" (Oatley, 2011, p. 116).

Mustafa Sa'eed of *Season* hints at the same notion of the temporary reinvention of the self. Lisa Zunshine (2006) points out that the pleasure and enjoyment of reading fiction is derived from "pretend play" and "trying out mental states" (p. 17). Zunshine makes a direct connection between pleasure and role playing obtained from fiction reading. *Season* also makes a direct connection between the reinvention of the self and crude pleasure. Mustafa Sa'eed says that to sleep with women he was willing to take on any performance that would please them (Salih, 1969). We learn that he lived with five women around the same time period (Salih, 1969) and that he adopted a different name for each of them: "Hassan," "Charles," "Amin," "Mustafa" and "Richard" (Salih, 1969, p. 31), all in pursuit of physical pleasure. Mustafa Sa'eed creates these five different characters within one year. By temporarily reinventing himself, Mustafa Sa'eed shows that England has a quality similar to a text of fiction. England is a venue that allows for the reinvention of the self in pursuit of pleasure and so do works of fiction. Mustafa Sa'eed switches between characters every time he meets a new potential fling or victim. On a few occasions in the novel, Mustafa Sa'eed refers to himself as a "lie" (Salih, 1969, p. 26) or even a "phantom" (Salih 39). Several scholars argue that Mustafa Sa'eed is a "lie" due to his conformity to orientalist stereotypes and performances (Foley, 2009; Hamilton, 2005; Parry, 2005). Mustafa Sa'eed knows that the orientalist ambiance he creates to frame his character does not describe who he is, yet he finds it pleasurable to temporarily adopt these lies, performances or fictitious characters.

Walid Al Hajjar's outstanding, long trilogy, titled *The search for the self*, also demonstrates that the West is a venue for the possible reinvention of the self. Walid Al Hajjar's work shows how excluding cultural distance can facilitate role-playing. In this work, the protagonist, Firas, a young man from Damascus, goes on a journey in the Middle East and Europe. The trilogy is not presented in chronological order, as the first volume, titled *al-Suqūṭ ilá a'lá* ("falling upwards"), mainly covers Firas' trip back to Damascus and several Arab Gulf countries after a long stay in Europe. His life in Europe is covered in detail in the subsequent volumes. The second and third volumes, *Musāfir bilā ḥaqāíb* ("a traveler without luggage") and *Riḥlat al-nīlūfar aw Ākhir al-Umawīyīn* ("the journey of the water lily or the last of the Umayyads"), respectively, are the focus of this discussion, since Firas never attempts to change his name or assume different characters when he lives in Syria, his home country, or even when he lives and works in other Arab countries. The reinvention of the self is limited to the European countries he visits: France, Italy, and Spain.

Firas, who comes from an old well-to-do Damascene family, is left to survive on his own when his father refuses to fund his study plans in France, where Firas attempts to study music and painting in Paris. Firas, who reinvents himself using different names and personae, not only survives but thrives in Europe. He uses the accommodating new environment(s) for the purpose of the empowerment of the self. Firas' story is told by his French friend Charles Gustave, the narrator. When Charles Gustave meets Firas for the first time in the Latin Quarter in Paris on a street corner – where Firas plays the orgue de barbarie (barrel organ) to make a living – Charles Gustave thinks that Firas is a true French musician (*Musāfir*, 1979). Firas introduces himself as Maximilian or Maxim. When the narrator learns that Firas is from the Middle East, he has a hard time believing it (*Musāfir*, 1979). From the very beginning of his stay in Paris, Firas role-plays and reinvented himself in projecting the French musician's character, not only in terms of his musical skills but also in name. This persona can be thought of as a form of pretend play. Much like in the novels discussed earlier, in this trilogy Europe is similar to a work of fiction that embodies a venue in which this Arab immigrant can transform his character.

Firas confirms the notion that Maximilian is a temporary persona when he writes a letter to his Syrian sweetheart Hadbaa. In this letter, and in reference to his character, he says, " إنه أقرب ما وجدت من حل إلى من أنشده اليوم من اللاهوية " 'it is the closest solution I have found for my pursuit of a no identity' (*Musāfir*, 1979, p. 57, my translation). For Firas, being in Paris is an answer to his quest for a no identity. The state of no identity he enjoys in Paris enables him to pretend play and adopt a different character. It is as if this state of no identity is a prerequisite for the reinvention of the self. Firas connects his pretend play or role playing directly to the absence of reality for him in the West. Upon arriving in Paris, he feels, " كأنني تركت الحقيقة و الواقع لغيري من الناس " 'as if [he] left reality behind for other people to experience' (*Musāfir*, 1979, p. 48, my translation). The reality Firas refers to in this quote is his life in Damascus. This thought by Firas is consistent with the title of this part of the trilogy, "a traveler without luggage" or "traveler without baggage." As stated earlier, Firas seeks relief and a break from his identity, the Syrian baggage or reality he left behind. As a result of this absence of reality or cultural baggage, he feels that tomorrow he might become "Ivan or Gunther" (*Musāfir*, 1979, p. 57).

Pushing Back Against the Fiction of the West

The experience of the Arab immigrant in the West is similar to that of fiction reading. Both alluring experiences entail privacy, exclusion/spectatorship, emotional distance, and the pleasure of temporary role playing. However, the experience of the West as fiction can turn into pain, even if it is initially pleasurable. Exclusion and the immigrants' incapacity for expression, along with its byproduct of silence, eventually cause a great deal of pain, which, in turn, require pushing back against this fiction. De-fictionalizing the West would commit the Arab immigrant to a specific identity and a cultural role. It can create a world, practices and expressions that allow for proper emotional expression. This is the case with the characters of Tayeb Salih's *Season*, Alaa Al Awany's *Chicago*, and Leila Aboulela's *The translator*. While Mustafa Sa'eed in *Season* and Dr. Thabit in *Chicago* resort to violence to respond to the fiction of the West, *The translator'*s heroine Sammar pushes back against the fiction of the West through the (re)creation of a discursive space revolving around religion.

Fiction and Violence

Dr. Thabit initially gives in to the fantasies of an American lifestyle, only to discover that in practice such fantasies are not readily accessible to him as an Egyptian national. Dr. Thabit struggles with his daughter's relationship with Jeff despite his stated willingness to accept it. In Delphine Pagès-El Karoui (2016) words, "despite all [Dr. Thabit's] efforts to Americanize, he never entirely manages to adapt to American mores, of which the boyfriend symbolizes the radical difference in values" (p. 450). His discomfort with this relationship proves that he is at a distance from American society, at an emotional and cultural level. In this sense, he is similar to a spectator/reader of a fictional text who is excluded from its practices and norms but only imaginatively feels included. Furthermore, Dr. Thabit's experience of the West as fiction has to do with his unwillingness to commit to a cultural role, as an American father, but rather to entertain the idea in a fashion akin to a temporary reinvention of the self – the same way a reader of a fictional text can temporarily identify or sympathize with a fictional character, without necessarily committing to that persona.

The imposition of such a pre-marital relationship on him, with the support of his wife Michelle, precludes the possibility of Dr. Thabit expressing his emotions and feelings in a proper

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manner. His struggle with a relationship of which he cannot approve shows his emotional difference/distance from some American norms. Unlike Michelle, he is angry and frustrated. Madelaine Hron states that Frantz Fanon noticed that Maghrebi immigrants in France feel and show symptoms of persistent pain (as cited in Hron, 2009, p. 65). Hron refers to the work of Fanon, who inferred that "Maghrebi immigrants are deprived of expressing their affectivity" (Fanon ctd. in Hron, 2009, p. 65). Fanon claims that "until they are allowed to express their affective experience, they will continue to somatize their sufferings of immigration" (Fanon A cited in Hron, 2009, p. 65). The situation that Hron and Fanon describe here is not unlike Dr. Thabit's dilemma. The inability to partake in American society in a manner that allows for a comfortable expression of emotions can lead to "somatizing" the resulting pain and suffering. This pain surfaces in the form of confusion on Dr. Thabit's part, arguments with his wife Michelle who supports Sarah's relationship, and a physical attack on his daughter Sarah. This violence on his part, however, results in a beginning of a departure from the experience of the United States as akin to fiction. If the fiction of the United States authorizes Dr. Thabit to imaginatively and temporarily reinvent himself as an American father, then pushing back against this fiction through violence will commit him to the new American father identity.

Attacking Sarah for her physical relationship with Jeff represents a watershed moment in Dr. Thabit's relationship to America as well as his daughter Sarah: "How he blamed himself for hitting her! He was so upset about it that he felt that his right hand was separate from his body. It was the hand that had hit Sarah. Why had he hit her? Why could not he control himself? How cruel he was to her! He spent several days grappling with his thoughts before he was able to cope with his sorrows" (Al Aswany, 2007, p. 267). This critical passage reveals the transformation that Dr. Thabit is about to undergo. He goes through intense emotional labor. In essence, by hitting his daughter, Dr. Thabit inflicts pain on himself as well. Yet, this emotional labor allows Dr. Thabit to make the decision to re-channel his emotions, from emotional distance, frustration, anger and pain to love, care and affection for his daughter. This violence on Dr. Thabit's part and the ensuing emotional labor pushes him to confront the two options presented: disowning his daughter versus offering her help and support (Al Aswany, 2007, p. 267). If the experience of the West and that of fiction reading are characterized by emotional distance/difference, then part of de-fictionalizing the West consists in bridging that emotional gap through rechanneling these emotions to love, care, and support for Sarah. Dr. Thabit's violence allows him to commit to the appropriate emotions as an American father towards his daughter even though this norm (relationships out of wedlock) is very challenging for him.

Dr. Thabit chooses to support his daughter. He does not force her to leave her boyfriend Jeff. By making the decision to not disown Sarah, he has made up his mind to handle his daughter's relationship in a more socially acceptable way in the United States. After this violent act, Dr. Thabit bridges the gap between himself and America. He reverses this exclusive nature of the United States by accepting America on its own terms. The pain he goes through after assaulting Sarah helps him cope with the pain of dealing with her relationship, accepting the status quo and the situation he has to deal with in America. If the fiction of the West entails the lack of commitment to a character role, then accepting America's terms requires Dr. Thabit's commitment to a role as an American father. Through violence, the fiction of America turns into reality for the Egyptian national.

Unlike Dr. Thabit, however, Mustafa Saeed of *Season* uses violence differently to reject the fiction of England and forgo the idea of integration altogether. Mustafa Sa'eed does not inflict pain and violence on Jean Morris alone. He leads his other "conquests," Ann Hammond, Sheila Greenwood, and Isabella Seymour to commit suicide as well (Salih, 1969, p. 28). In court, although

Mustafa Sa'eed says he is not sure he is the cause of the suicide of these three women, in his head, he wants to admit that it was he who led them to commit suicide (Salih, 1969, p. 29). These three women promise and deliver sexual pleasure. These three women grant the Arab immigrant, Mustafa Sa'eed, unlimited access to their bodies, thereby creating a semblance of accessibility and inclusion into British society. Such semi-relationships trick him into believing that he can marry into a family when he tries to marry Ann Hammond. In reality, Mustafa Sa'eed remains on the fringes of society, and these sexual encounters are only private experiences for himself and his victims. In other words, Mustafa Sa'eed experiences England as fiction through the semblance of inclusion. The fictional paradox that Mustafa Sa'eed encounters in his trysts is that his being present with different women, through the assumption of different fictional characters, precludes the possibility of real integration. He can be with three different women simultaneously precisely because he is committed to none and integrated into no family or community – similar to a reader of a fictional text who identifies with different characters simultaneously.

However, something is different about Jean Morris, when considering the West as similar to fiction reading. Jean Morris, the woman he finally marries, is different from the other women in an important way: She explicitly conveys England to Mustafa Sa'eed as inaccessible and ungraspable. While Sa'eed's former conquests fool him into believing that England is inclusive, Jean Morris makes it very clear that he will pursue such an illusion to no avail. In essence, Jean Morris represents the exclusive nature of fiction. Mustafa Sa'eed (1966) says, "When I avoided her she would entice me to her, and when I ran after her she fled from me" (Salih, 1966, p. 129). He chases her for three years before they marry (Salih, 1966, p. 130). She abuses him at every point in their relationship, calling him names ("savage bull" (Salih, 1966, p. 130) and "ugly" (Salih, 1966, p. 27), cheating on him (Salih, 1966, p. 134), and not even letting him have sex with her as his wife (Salih, 1966, p. 131). Wail Hassan (2003) argues that through "[Jean Morris'] stubborn and humiliating resistance to his advances, she merges more fully . . . as a psychic function and trope of empire" (p. 102). To Mustafa Sa'eed, Jean Morris represents the ugly truth of the fictional West, which is exclusive and inaccessible, except at an imaginative level, just like a fictional text. She wakes him up from the dream. She represents the painful trigger that provokes Mustafa Sa'eed to hit back against the fiction of the West.

Mustafa Sa'eed needs Jean Morris to save him from the lie and the phantom he keeps referring to himself as. Also, she becomes the sacrificial lamb whose actual and symbolic murder represents an attempt to break away from the West and its fictional experience. Saree Makdisi (1992) says, "Mustafa carries out this self-appointed mission [of throwing back colonialism on the colonizers] by inflicting pain and suffering on British women" (p. 811). Whether or not Sa'eed carries out this revenge on behalf of the colonized collective remains unclear. However, his revenge against the fictional colonizer changes him at an individual level. Killing her and the prospect of ending his English experience changes the emotionless nature of Mustafa Sa'eed, a nature which England invites and encourages. There are two instances of Mustafa Sa'eed crying in the novel, both related to the murder of Jean Morris. He cries for the first time in the novel when he attempts to kill her. He cries because he remembers the death of his mother, which had happened nine months earlier when, at the time, he "felt no sadness – it was as though the matter was of no concern to [him]" (Salih, 1969, pp. 131–132). However, upon this first attempt to kill her, he says, "I remembered this and wept from deep within my heart" (Salih, 1969, p. 132). Through this act of crying Mustafa Sa'eed starts to acquire a sense of affection and love toward people. For the first time in the novel Mustafa Sa'eed becomes deeply emotional and affectionate.

He cries for the second time in the novel when he receives a seven-year jail sentence for the murder: "and on the day they sentenced me at the Old Bailey to seven years' imprisonment, I

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found no bosom except [Mrs. Robinson's] on which to rest my head. 'Do not cry, dear Child,' [Mrs. Robinson] had said to me, patting my head" (Salih, 1969, p. 23). In this second instance, his crying is more of a sigh of relief than fear of punishment, as if Mustafa Sa'eed has finally gotten rid of the burden of the lie and the fiction he has lived all along. During his trial, he has a strong desire to stand up in court and say, "I ask of you to rule that the lie, [Mustafa Sa'eed himself], be killed" (Salih, 1969, p. 28). Crying is a sigh of relief as his internal thoughts and wishes have been answered.

Mustafa Sa'eed drops his English life altogether to embark on a reversal process—only this reversal will take place in Sudan. He says, "Everything which happened before my meeting [Jean Morris] was a premonition; everything I did after I killed her was an apology, not for killing her, but for the lie that was my life" (Salih, 1966, p. 26). Mustafa Sa'eed sets up a contrast between his life before and after killing Jean Morris. Pushing back against England-as-fiction through killing Jean Morris marks the beginning of Sa'eed's home return journey. He goes back to Sudan and marries Hosna Bint Mahmoud, never pursuing any other women. With her, he fathers two sons. In Sudan, Mustafa Sa'eed does not play roles or use different names the way he does in England. He becomes well-integrated into a small village community. He goes to the mosque on a regular basis and contributes to the village community regularly as well, where "[he] give[s] of his labor and his means in glad times and sad" (Salih, 1969, pp. 7–8). Here, he demonstrates how he cares about the well-being of his community. He emphasizes the collective and communal through his actions rather than the individualistic—in a stark contrast to his private life and experiences in England. In this sense, Mustafa Sa'eed's "apology" comes in the form of reversing the elements that make England fictional for him—i.e., privacy, role playing, and emotional distance—and living this reversed experience in his home country of Sudan. Reversing the West-as-fiction directs his attention, affection, sense of the collective and commitment towards the country of origin.

Defictionalizing Through Religion

Leila Aboulela's novel, *The translator*, takes place in Khartoum, Sudan, and Aberdeen, Scotland. The novel revolves around Sammar, who loses her husband, Tarig, and attempts to deal with her loss while working as an Arabic translator in Scotland. Sammar develops a friendship with a Scottish scholar of Islamic and Middle Eastern studies Rae Isles, and this relationship ends in marriage after the latter converts to Islam. Sammar experiences Scotland as fiction, similar to the way Mustafa Sa'eed and Ra'fat Thabit view England and the United States, respectively, but she resists differently. When describing her experience in Scotland, Sammar feels that her expression is very limited, as "when she spoke to people, they seemed wary, on their guard, as if any minute she would say something out of place, embarrassing" (Aboulela, 1999, p. 6). In fact, she characterizes her experience in Scotland as "silent": "She had to be silent. Use her teeth and lips to be silent" (Aboulela, 1999, p. 40). She is excluded and unwelcome: a spectator and a listener. She is much like a reader of a fictional text who remains at a distance from the text and the events it describes. Sammar does not feel privy to the practices of Scottish society either, as is clear in her description of Christmas in Aberdeen as "hidden" (Aboulela, 1999, p. 27). It is everywhere and nowhere, since she cannot participate in it.

She does not experience Scotland collectively, as she does not have much in common with the Scots. Sammar, however, attempts to change the status quo and alter that fictional experience. To counter the pressure and isolation of the environment she is surrounded with, Sammar relies on religion. To Sammar, Islam—with its practices, rituals, and discursive space—is important for her survival. After her husband Tarig's death and her return to Aberdeen alone, the only thing that

keeps her alive is her prayers . She describes her prayers as "the last touch with normality" (p. 15). Fiction proves to be difficult for her, but practicing Islam seems to have a calming and reassuring effect. It is the reality or normality made possible by religion that makes her feel in her element. Tina Steiner argues that Aboulela treats "religion as a site of translocal identity formation, which offers her characters the possibility of resisting the hegemonic pressures of assimilating into a secular present in Britain" (Steiner, 2008, p. 7). Sammar finds the fictional characteristics of Scotland (such as isolation, exclusion, spectatorship, and privacy/loneliness) troubling, so she strikes back with rituals that connect her to a "translocal" Muslim identity and community, a place where she is not an observer/spectator but a participant.

To this end of creating and expanding a religious space, Sammar pursues Rae Isles. Rae Isles is a Middle East historian. He is never surprised by what Sammar says, and that makes her comfortable talking around him (Aboulela, 1999, p. 6). Interestingly, the semiotic of the home culture becomes more vivid and longer lasting for her when she visits and talks to Rae at his house: "But she had never stepped into a vision before, home had never come here before" (Aboulela, 1999, p. 19). Her conversations with Rae facilitate a familiar discursive, religious, and cultural space. The collective space she experiences with Rae is synonymous with home, as opposed to the metaphoric experience of "homelessness" the exilic subject experiences in the West. The presence of home can potentially change the fictional experience of Scotland for Sammar. Steiner rightly argues that Aboulela asserts that "the foreign culture becomes intelligible when Sammar recognizes herself in it, or rather she recognizes her own cultural norms that are inscribed in it through a particular discursive strategy" (Steiner, 2008, p. 21). Rae makes this discursive space of Islam, a discourse or conversations about Islam, possible for Sammar to express and recognize herself in it.

Sammar takes the initiative to visit Rae in hospital when he is sick (Aboulela, 1999), and she attempts to ask him to convert to Islam on more than one occasion so that they could get married. Although she hesitates to ask him to convert first, she manages to finally utter her request. Not only is Sammar trying to carve out a space for herself in Aberdeen, but she is also attempting to superimpose this cultural and discursive space upon Western individuals such as Rae. On his end, Rae admires Islam as a philosophy and thought, but it "annoys him" that "Muslims expect him to convert just because he knows so much about [Islam]" (Aboulela, 1999, p. 22). Rae does not wish to adopt it as a religion or faith. In asking Rae to convert, Sammar, according to Shirin Edwin, subverts the Orientalist notion of the "disengaged, detached, and objective" Western scholar, studying the Middle East "for the purpose of his research on Islam" (Edwin, 2013, p. 67). The detached study of Islam by itself is not adequate to make Scotland home for Sammar. For Sammar Islam is a faith, a religion, that one adopts, follows, practices, and to which one surrenders. The Scottish cultural text, at least initially, is not flexible enough to accommodate Sammar's Islam and religious beliefs.

In rejecting the consideration of Islam as just merely a philosophical thought and succeeding to convert Rae, Sammar turns the fiction of Britain into an autobiography. The fiction of Scotland is not flexible enough to include her Islam, so she rewrites it. Maitre (1983) argues that worlds of fiction are characterized by their "thinness," where their "subject matter . . . exhibits openness and indeterminacy" (p. 38). She defines thinness as the texts' inability to provide a complete description of its subject matter. Emily T. Troscianko (2013) confirms this view, where she believes that the imaginative acts the reader engages in are similar to language in their "indeterminacy" (p. 187). This indeterminacy, according to Troscianko, derives from language's own indeterminacy. In other words, the language of a text of fiction can accommodate different meanings, concepts, imaginative perceptions, and so on. Sammar's view of Scotland as fiction deviates from the notion described by Maitre and Troscianko. She goes beyond just imaginatively

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filling in spaces marked by indeterminacy as she settles for no less than engrafting her own cultural text upon Scotland. Sammar seeks to rewrite that fictional text and her role in it. If fiction only allows the reader to imaginatively interact with its text without granting the reader the ability to rewrite or change the text itself, then Sammar alters the fictional text of Scotland, or parts of it, by rewriting it into her own autobiography and reality.

Conclusion

Tayeb Salih's *Season* received much critical acclaim, and so did Aboulela's *The translator*, though to a lesser extent. However, Ghali's *Beer* and Al Hajjar's *Trilogy* remain relatively critically untouched. On the other hand, Al Aswany's *Chicago* received significant readership, but much critical work remains to be done on it. Yet, what these novels have in common is their depiction of the Arab immigrant experience in the West as similar to fiction reading. Though by no means static, this experience is marked by its lure, privacy, emotional distance, and the possibility of role playing and the temporary reinvention of the self. While these characteristics comprise the lure of the fictional West, they also account for its oppression and exclusion. When the initially luring experience turns into pain, the Arab immigrant characters push back against it through violence or through establishing a discursive space that turns the fiction of the West into a familiar home. The violence of Dr. Ra'fat Thabit inadvertently turns the fiction of America into an unpleasant reality through his commitment to the persona of an American father. On the other hand, Mustafa Sa'eed's violence marks his rejection of England's fiction altogether and return to Sudan. *The translator*'s Sammar uses a different strategy to turn the fiction of Scotland into reality/home: she uses religion, conversations about Islam, and the conversion of and marriage to Rae Isles to rewrite the fiction of Scotland into an autobiography. Implementing and understanding the metaphor of the West as akin to fiction reading is important to Arab diasporic studies, Arab immigrant literature, and immigrant literature in the broader sense because it informs our understanding of the challenge of integration into Western countries, as well as the paradox of its lure and pain.

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