CHAPTER FOUR

GLOBALIZATION IN SELECT PRO-GLOBALIZATION ARABIC NOVELS

4.1. Introduction

As has been discussed earlier, globalization is not just an economic and political phenomenon. It has had its impact in the domain of art and literature. Many Arab novels centre around this issue. Many among them perceive it as a source of danger and threat to the economic and cultural rights of the people. The anti-globalization novels depict this phenomenon as a process that encourages discrimination, and enables the powerful to control the weak. Arab world is presented in these novels as mere consumers of the Western goods. However, not all the Arab novels on globalization are critical of it. Some Arab novelists see it as a positive development. To these writers, globalization helps loosen state control over the economy, and by encouraging competition, it facilitates the maximum use of human and material resources. For this group of writers as I hope to show in this chapter, globalization plays a crucial role in cementing the gap between different cultures. These novelists see the many-sidedness of the global order, especially the emergence since the 1960s of techno-regions, cyberspace, the Internet, and aeroplanes which significantly defy old classifications of time, place, border, boundary, and limit. Chief among these novels are: Girls of Riyadh (2007) by the Saudi novelist Rajaa Al-Sanea, Only in London (2002) by the Lebanese-English novelist Hanan Al-Shaykh, and Habibi (1997) by the Palestinian-American novelist Noami Shihab Nye. These authors invite the reader to participate in intercultural relations where differences are celebrated. Their aim is to create a transnational culture: where all the boundaries of race, gender, class, nation, or religion melt.
4.2. The Lighter that Fuels a Blaze of Change: Globalization, Internet, Love, Traditions, and Social Discrimination and Taboos in Rajaa Al-Sanea’s Girls of Riyadh

I felt it is my duty to reveal another side of Saudi life to the Western world.

(Rajaa Al-Sanea, Girls of Riyadh vii)

I want people to know these are issues [social traditions] we go through, and we never talk openly, just because we’re raised in a way that everything brings shame... Most novels describe Saudi 50 years ago. They talk about when girls were not educated: there are no cell phones, no Internet, no description of what modern life is really like. What you have in Saudi now is a society that is changing. I’m talking about a life that starts in 1999—when the Internet arrived. It exposed young people to what is happening outside Saudi, not just what you’re taught at home or at school. You have a whole world to learn from and you tend to compare what you have with what others have.

(Al-Sanea, Interview with Sally Williams)

Kerstin W. Shands in her article “Neither East Nor West: From Orientalism to Postcoloniality,” wonders whether Westerners are right when they say that the old Orientalist clichés and stereotypes are still with the Arabs in the twenty-first century. Have decades of migration, globalization (and postcolonial theory) had no impact on the Arab world views? Are latent and manifest forms of Orientalism still with us in this era of globalization, underpinning and justifying new imperialist pursuits leading to new formations of ‘us’ and ‘them’? These questions, among many others are raised by a young writer from Saudi Arabia in her novel Banat
*al-Riyadh*, or *Girls of Riyadh*. The book was banned in Saudi Arabia and then published in Arabic in Lebanon in 2005. It was translated into several languages. The English translation by Marilyn Booth and the author herself first appeared in 2007. Hereafter, I will refer to the book as *Girls*.

In this novel, Rajaa Al-Sanea criticizes the people from the West for their inability to see the changes and positive aspects of Saudi Arabia. They still stereotype Arab women as illiterate, passive, and veiled harem. She writes back to the Westerners to educate them that Saudi Arabia is not the land of terrorism where wives are beaten up by their men, or where women cannot work or drive. The book is the story of the private life of the narrator’s four privileged twenty something-friends. The four girls, the protagonists of the novel, are shown as intelligent people, who are just trying to live like other girls anywhere. In fact, the girls are a product of the consumer culture. Their fascination for London, Chicago, and San Francisco is indispensable to the narrative, in so far as these places are metonymies for the free women who live there. This, however, does not mean that they want to abandon their religion and culture.

The novelist sets out to offer a corrective view of the women of Saudi Arabia. Women here fall deeply in love and out also of love just like women elsewhere. Rajaa in this bold and daring novel voices the Saudi women’s freedom, power, and identity which can be extrapolated to include the Saudi society as a whole. She opens her novel with:

> It seemed to me, and to many other Saudis, that the Western world still perceives us either romantically, as the land of Arabian Nights and the land where bearded sheikhs sit in their tents surrounded by their beautiful harem women, or politically, as the land that gave birth to Bin Laden and other terrorists, the land
where women are dressed in black from head to toe and where every house has its
own oil well in the backyard! Therefore, I knew it would be very hard, maybe
impossible, to change this cliché. (Girls vii)

In the above quote, the novelist states the problem, marks the challenge, and demands
analyzing the main themes and thought patterns of the novel. But before that it is imperative to
have a glimpse at the girls’ stories. Gamrah is the most conservative individual. Sadeem is an
unlucky hopeless romantic, Michelle is a rebel who questions her society’s restrictions, and
Lamees is the love achiever, who succeeds in getting exactly what she wants. Each of the four
girls has her personal tale: Gamrah finds herself in the United States with Rashid, her husband,
whom she knows nothing about except that both families arranged a marriage that united her
with him. However, with the passage of time, she loves him despite his mercilessness. When she
learns of his affair with an American-Japanese woman called Kari, she loses her mind. Gamrah
has her revenge by not taking her contraceptive pill. She becomes pregnant in order to use her
"children as human shields" (85). Rashid slaps her and sends her back to Riyadh and the divorce
paper soon follows. Her family prevents her from going out since divorced women in their
opinion only bring problems. But her friends manage to get her out of that unbearable jail every
now and then.

Gamrah’s best friend, the unlucky romantic business student Sadeem is romantically
involved with a handsome Waled. Though they are officially married and their marriage
contract is written, he leaves her because she allows him to “cross the line” (32). She gives
herself to him one night pretending that he is her husband officially despite the wedding not
having yet taken place. The second shock is caused by Firas whose elite position in Saudi Arabia
and the fact that he has never married before prevents him from getting married to a divorced woman (divorced women in the Saudi society have a poor ill-reputation especially if they have travelled outside the country and met men as Sadeem did). The most courageous among the four friends is the half-Arab half-American, Michelle. She is the daughter of a Saudi father and American mother. She meets a handsome Faisel at the mall, falls in love with him, hoping that he would be her perfect hero who could understand her American cultural patterns. However, he belongs to a less tolerant family. His mother stands in the way of their marriage because Michelle’s mother is American. Lamees is a determined, rebellious student of medicine who challenges all the social and religious restrictions and falls in love with Ali, a Shiite well-mannered boy. However, this adventure comes to an end when they are caught by the religious police. Lamees does not surrender and she becomes the only friend who finds success in both her professional career and her love life. She marries her colleague Nizar, moves to Canada to pursue higher studies with her husband.

Through Yahoo subscribers, Rajaa Al-Sanea narrates the bitter day-to-day life of her four young friends as they encounter the challenges of the life of young people in a rich community of Saudi Arabia. She uses the latest advantage of globalization, Internet, to expose the private world of Saudi Arabia’s most cloistered citizens to uncover young women who ultimately share the same hopes and dreams as their Western counterparts. She starts her novel with:

Ladies and Gentlemen: You are invited to join me in one of the most explosive scandals and noisiest, wildest all-night parties around. Your personal tour guide—and that’s moi—will reveal to you a new world, a world closer to you than you
might imagine. We all live in this world but do not really experience it, seeing only what we can tolerate and ignoring the rest. (1)

The e-narrator also mischievously promises, in the form of address, to reveal and expose the stories of her girlfriends with a few changes:

And since I have quite boldly started writing this e-mail without consulting my girlfriends, ... I’ve decided to change all the names of the people I will write about and make a few alterations to the facts, but in a way that will not compromise the honesty of the tale nor take the sting out of the truth. To be frank, I don’t give a damn about the repercussions of this project of mine. As Kazantzakis put it, “I expect nothing. I fear no one. I am free.” (2)

Through this novel, the author attempts to navigate the narrow straits between love, desire, fulfillment, and Arab traditions. For her, in this age of globalization, Saudis are still victims of old traditions, orientalist clichés, and stereotypes. Her honest portrayal of controversial subject matter has made Al-Sanea a literary sensation and a public enemy, sparking fierce debate in the media and online discussion groups. Predicting this issue (the reaction of Saudis to her writing about what they consider taboos), the e-narrator says:

Not a week passes anymore without my reading some article about myself in a newspaper or magazine or Internet chat room... it really stunned me to see a popular magazine on the rack with bold letters across the cover that said: “What Do Celebrities Think of Today’s Hottest Talk in the Saudi Street?” ... I flipped through it quickly, flying through the roof out of happiness! Four entire pages crammed full of photos of writers and journalists and politicians and actors and
singers and sports stars, each having their little say on the burning issue of the
e-mails from an unknown source that have been the talk of the Saudi street for
months!(157)

Addictively readable, *Girls of Riyadh* has been called the first modern Arabic novel and its comic but poignant accounts of contemporary Saudi life make it an instant classic.

As has been mentioned earlier, the novel depicts the four girls’ courtship, marriage, divorce, shopping, and parting mostly set in Riyadh. But it also tracks the young women’s travels to different European and American metropolises. The text describes stories of love-gone-wrong and highlights troubled social dynamics between men and women that eventually create dysfunctional relationships and psychic disturbances. Obviously, the narrative correlates masculinity with irrationality and exposes men’s loyal but unreflective affinity and unambiguous complicity with old-fashioned conventions. Nevertheless, Rajaa Al-Sanea does not try to dispel the folklore around Arabian women but provokes the phantasm that ultimately intensifies the interest in gazing at *Girls of Riyadh*. The world of women in Arabia is a concealed site and it generates curiosity, fascination, and wonder even for the Saudi men.

The story documents not only the challenges of finding love in a gender segregated society, but also the dual roles women often perform in order to fulfill themselves materially and spiritually while attempting to satisfy the cultural expectations of others. They experiment with tabooed pleasures such as alcohol, communication via mobile phone and e-mail to lovers they are forbidden to meet, and yet adopt the role of obedient daughters and sisters when in the company of their family. The novel demonstrates how the experiences of these young women are similar to many women all over the world, with the e-narrator observing that “a girl can’t stroll
about in the malls under the protection of God without being checked out thoroughly by everyone, especially her own kind, from her abaya to the covering over her hair to the way she walks and the bags she carries and in which direction she looks and in front of what merchandise she stops” (17).

Desiring to know this world (women’s world) provokes different reactions, some of which were voiced by major critics in the Arab world. For example, the comment on the blurb by a major male poet and novelist, Ghazi al-Gosaibi says: "she draws the curtain and uncovers what is hidden behind it, the exciting world of young women in Riyadh." In another sentence, he describes their space as the "enchanted and enchanting world." However, some others were opposed to the book, evident from the writer receiving death threats for bringing her nation’s women into disrepute. Reem Al-Faisal, in her article, “The Girls of Riyadh,” expresses her disappointment over the book. She writes that Saudi women have an opulent life that is not available for their Western counterparts.

I’m disappointed in the book. I read it expecting it to be more than it is ... Many of the women outside of Arabia would cut their arm off to have the so-called limited luxury these women enjoy... So forgive me if I don’t cry my heart out for these women whose greatest tragedy in life is that they haven’t received red roses on Valentine’s Day.... As for those clueless girls in Riyadh: You don’t know how lucky you are.

I strongly agree with Al-Gabali that Rajaa Al-Sanea can be seen as “a mediator between Saudi/Arabs and Americans. Her characters, like the half-half Saudi-American Michelle, are trying to negotiate the two worlds emphasizing the importance of cultural exchange between the
Arab and the Western worlds” (182). I believe that the novel is a call for positive globalization, one that encourages cultural globalization that allows cultures to interact and benefit from each other. It aims at the establishment of global interaction that facilitates cultural integration and encourages healthy cultural exchange. Living in two worlds (Saudi Arabia and the United States), Rajaa hopes to help narrow the gaps and differences between cultures to facilitate coexistence and positive interaction among human civilizations without bias, intolerance, or prejudice, benefiting from each other’s wisdom, traditions, science, technologies, and so forth. To Rajaa, for the Arab society in general and the Arab women in particular to lead a life like their Western counterparts, some social traditions and man-made taboos ought to be violated. In this novel, Rajaa is critical of some Arab/Saudi traditions which have nothing to do with religion but with human laws. She criticizes the Arab society for the meaning and practice of social discrimination. For example, Shiite people are repressed in real society of Saudi Arabia. In the narrative, Fatima, the Shiite, as she is called by her colleagues and other girls in their circles, leads her life quietly, while Lamees and a few other girls find it difficult to resist the social pressure to avoid her. The e-narrator is not concerned with these details, however, as she is with exposing the ignorance of public opinion that discriminates against women and minority groups (Girls 127-133). Lamees likes Ali, Fatima’s brother, but the affair ends when the Morals and Virtue Police find them together in a cafe as dating is a punishable crime in the country. “Poor Ali. He had been such a sweet guy, and frankly, if Lamees had been allowed to continue seeing him, and more important if he hadn’t been Shiite, she might actually have fallen in love with him,” says the e-narrator, who is portrayed as a friend of the four girls (140). Another instance of social discrimination is the story of Faisel and Michelle which ends in failure, not because they do not love each other, but because her mother is American. Though we are in the
twenty first century, Faisal’s family refuses this marriage because “the family of that girl was not of their sort” (94). Because in Saudi tradition premarital love is taboo, he could not even “say plainly to his mother: the girl loved him and he loved her. He loved her even more than she loved him” (95).

The ill-treatment of a divorced woman is also one of the old traditions that Rajaa wants to question and break. The case of Gamrah after her divorce evokes pity for “she suffered from boredom, imprisoned in the house... Even her younger sister Shahla had more freedom than her! That’s because she was not a divorced woman” (142). After some time, her brothers agree to connect Internet to her computer to help Gamrah pass her time and kill her boredom. They connect it because “spending time on the Internet is better than having [Gamrah] roaming the streets of Riyadh out of boredom!” (159). However, the circle of “the never-ending problems Hessah (her sister) was having with her husband, Khalid,” begins (159). When he comes to know that Gamrah, his wife’s sister starts to use the Internet, he threatens to divorce his wife. Hessah says to her mother: “So, as long as Gamrah has gone and gotten a divorce, do you want me to follow her example and get myself a divorce, too? My Lord, if Khalid hears any gossip at all about Gamrah, anything bad she’s doing online with the guys she chats with every day, anything!, he’s going to throw me out and my children, too. Out in the street!” (159). This shows the repression under which the Saudi women, divorcees in particular, live. Rajaa rejects the patriarchal belief that any man in the family has power over the woman even if he is neither her father nor brother.

Another miserable case is that of poor Sadeem who is shocked twice: first is when Waleed, her official husband, leaves her because she honestly expresses her love and let him
“cross the line” once before their wedding celebration (32). The second shock is caused by Firas, her hero, an important man in Saudi society. She meets him first in London. In spite of the amazing love story that unites them spiritually through cell phones, webcams, and computer screens, he marries a girl of his family’s choosing. Firas does not marry her not because he does not love her, but because she is a divorced woman and the fact that he has never married before. Reading the long romantic story of both lovers Firas and Sadeem, I as many other readers get shocked how traditions are not only pulling us backward but also destroying our social life and happiness. Many readers as I do would like to add our voices to the author’s and ask: “Did it make any sense that a man of Firas’s strength and resourcefulness was unable to convince his family that he could marry a divorced woman? Or was it just that he was incapable of convincing himself of it? Had she failed, after all of her attempts, to reach the level of perfection befitting a man like Firas? (209). The novelist also questions: “Is divorce a major crime committed by the woman only? Why doesn’t our society harass the divorced man the way it crushes the divorced woman? I know that you readers are always ready to dismiss and make light of these naïve questions of mine, but surely you can see that they are logical questions and they deserve some careful thought” (173).

The misery of Sadeem does not end with the failure of the two foresaid love stories. At the end of the novel, Sadeem is forced to a loveless marriage. Her family arranges unification between her and her cousin Tariq, a man who loves her but she does not. Here the e-narrator cites Khalil Gibran’s words: “nothing is harder than the life of a woman who finds herself torn between a man who loves her and a man she loves” (220). Through the loveless marriage stories of Tariq and Sadeem, Rashid and Gamrah, Rajaa criticizes the situation of some Arab women
who fall victims to the traditions of arranged marriage. Rajaa is rebel against this oppressive social tradition and injustice.

I believe that the failure of the wonderful love stories between Sadeem and Waleed, between her and Firas, between Michelle and Faisal, and between Lamees and Ali, is intended to shock the reader because Rajaa wants to convey a message. In her interview with Penguin Book Club, Rajaa expresses her message and states that in Saudi Arabia, “class is more restrictive than gender especially nowadays. Maybe fifty years ago men were privileged much more than women and so they were not under any sort of restrictions. Now, equality between genders is happening slowly, and both are victims of the social restrictions of class, tribe, and religious views.” However, Rajaa is not very pessimistic. Her hope is conveyed through the successful love story of Lamees and Nizar. Their success in their social and career life is meant to convey that premarital love is not a trivial and failure in all cases. She wants the people to know that their belief that “love after marriage is the only love that lasts, while premarital love is only frivolous play,” is a myth (213).

Another tradition criticized by Rajaa is banning the celebrations of unreligious occasions such as Valentine’s Day. She is of the view that as such kind of celebrations do no harm to society, they should not be banned. People are free to celebrate them or not. The description of the situation of the Saudi girls on Valentine’s Day in the novel is both funny and real. It reflects their wish to celebrate this day with their lovers as other girls do elsewhere in the world:

On Valentine’s Day, Michelle put on a red shirt and carried a matching handbag. A large number of the other female students did the same,... the whole campus looked bright red,... and the guys liked it; they cruised the streets stopping every girl they saw to give her a red rose with their phone numbers wrapped around the
Sarhan 177

tem. The girls liked it, too, since now they had finally found someone to give them red roses the way they always saw it done in films. That was before the Religious Police banned anything that might remotely suggest a celebration of the holiday of love, Saint Valentine’s Day. (57-58)

The growth of this particular Western celebration of romantic love within Saudi culture occurs because of globalization and its expansion of visual culture as commodity – “Saudis started celebrating Valentine’s Day in the late nineties after they heard about it through satellite TV channels broadcast from Lebanon and Egypt” (58). Rajaa asserts that celebrating this holiday in Saudi Arabia is prohibited, because “love [is] treated like an unwelcome visitor in [the Saudi] region” (58). Indeed, as a young girl, Al-Sanea hopes to lead a life in a society rid of all these unreasonable traditions/taboo.

Rajaa’s novel and lifestyle have caused controversy especially among the conservative sections of the Saudi society but more liberal-minded individuals considered her a role model. She confesses:

Everyone is condemning my [Rajaa’s] bold writing, and perhaps my boldness in writing at all. Everyone is blaming me for the fury I have stirred up around “taboo” topics that in this society we have never been accustomed to discussing so frankly and especially when the opening salvos come from a young woman like me. But isn’t there a starting point for every drastic social change? (97)

In spite of its boldness in its discussion of social conventions and taboos, Rajaa rejects the view that her book carries any overt political message. Roula Khalaf in her article “Driven to Attraction: The Women of Riyadh,” cites the author as saying: “I hate it when people think I was trying to deliver a message. In the Arab world, most writings are tarnished with motives or
political messages that turn them into propaganda and I hate for my book to be categorized as such. I leave it to the reader to come to his own conclusions." But many Saudis saw in the book a passionate cry for putting an end to religious interference in people’s lives. However, in the Arabic version, Rajaa writes: “who ever imagined, that Martin Luther King, the peaceful priest, would liberate the blacks in America from the laws of racial discrimination and begin his movement for equality between blacks and whites with an ordinary protest in his own town against the segregation of whites and blacks in public bus seating? (Banat 113). These lines are found only in the first edition of the Arabic version but not in the English version for political reasons. I read the deletion of political revolutionary ideas as reflection of the suppression of Arab writers under the present regimes.

The above comparison is not random, for the cultural underpinnings of the narrative are divided between Arab and Anglo-American markers and significations, as the characters move back and forth, either for study, leisure, or settlement. The engagement with the local tradition and life, however, is more focused. The e-narrator, in her omniscient voice, tends to destabilize a closely guarded traditional society whose custodians belong to the privileged religious institution and its allies among the dominating and ruling elite. To her, this class is no less discriminatory than the one in America that Martin Luther King fought. In other words, she allies herself with the latter, and women with the blacks. The gulf in this case is not between developed and underdeveloped nation-states but between dominant and subordinate groups all over the world. Her medium is no less than the most global discovery so far. By using the Internet to break through barriers and boundaries among classes, groups, communities, and even nations, the e-narrator benefits from the most positive offering of globalization. More perhaps than the commodities enumerated in The Committee, the Internet, lavishly used by the leisure-
class protagonists. Each chapter of *Girls of Riyadh* is an Internet message, an e-mail to the narrator's subscribers, with a title for each message and a prologue quoted from the Quran, the Prophet, or poets, and writers. Thus, the Internet is the narrative tour de force and it is what interests me as a reader.

The discussion of *Girls of Riyadh* in the context of globalization is incomplete without discussing the use and impact of the Internet and technology on the Saudi society as has been expressed in the novel. In the text under scrutiny, the Internet and other inventions of this age of globalization such as cell phones, Bluetooth, and specifically emails allows the e-narrator to establish communication between people within and outside Saudi Arabia exposing and negotiating on the local, national, and transnational levels. So it is imperative to comment on what this narrative conveys in terms of print culture and computer technology. How is new information technology transforming the Arab society and rapidly changing youth culture? *Girls of Riyadh* inaugurates the trend of chick lit forging links with cyber-fiction and emerging as a serious critique of society. I focus on the use of technology in the Saudi society and comment on how the text invokes and illustrates techno-rhetorics in order to differentiate and characterize a new generation of twenty something girls who live in another oil boom in Riyadh.

The novelist's use and reliance on electronic messages represents her assumption that the Internet has become the major medium of literature. In her interview with Asharq Al-Awsat Newspaper, Rajaa Al-Sanea states that the “Internet represents a virtual world that has become associated with people's day-to-day life.” The girls' online participation creates new forms of communication across gender lines, interrupting traditional social conventions. It is used to present the conflict between tradition and modernity. It constitutes not simply an adoration of American popular culture but, more specifically, an investment in what that cultural milieu
represents in terms of gender parity between the sexes. Al-Sanea is against the notion of separating literature from real life because this prevents literature from achieving its purposes. Both Arab readers and writers, she believes, are not self-confident and deal with modernity with fear. She encourages the notion of writing in a realist mode as long as it is well-thought of and pregnant with ideas. For Rajaa, realism increases the value and appeal of the texts.

Socially, Al-Sanea in her *Girls of Riyadh* uses the technical capabilities that have reached us along with globalization to permit several girls to escape the constraints of social tradition as practiced by Saudi privileged classes, by men in particular. The e-narrator reproduces her Friday e-mails, after the Friday prayers, as chapters written in Arabic, combining the cryptic e-mail-styled messages with the elaborate description of young females as they traverse the land between their country and Europe or America. The e-mail, a narrative now, works as a cross-boundary medium. In the wake of technology and global culture, Rajaa Al-Sanea creates a text that opens with a parody of an email address:

Welcome to the Subscribers’ List of Memoirs Disclosed

To subscribe, send a blank message to:
seerehwenfadha7et subscribe@yahoogroups.com

To cancel your subscription, send a blank message to:
seerehwenfadha7et unsubscribe@yahoogroups.com

To contact the list manager, send a message to:
seerehwenfadha7et@yahoogroups.com (Girls xiii)
In structuring and printing the text as email messages, the visual representation ultimately calls attention to the rendition of an electronic text. The e-narrator’s gluing to the computer screen, is supported by the flexibility of the Internet and emails as the ‘other’ of literature. Email mediation has not been deployed in fictional narratives in this manner before Girls of Riyadh.

The narrative begins with:

To: "seerehwenfadha7et@yahooogroups.com
From: "seerehwenfadha7et"
Date: February 13, 2004
Subject: I Shall Write of My Friends (1).

Then she invites her readers/subscribers to join her in her narration of the stories of her four girl friends. The e-narrator explains how the alleged emails are circulated and relates them in a self-reflexive moment:

During the past few weeks, I have been reading news stories that talk about me, or let’s say, about my e-mails! Eminent national newspapers are writing about a prevailing uproar here, and behind it is an anonymous young woman who sends an e-mail every Friday to a large number of Internet users in Saudi Arabia. In these e-mails, she tells the stories of her four female friends... The girls belong to society’s “velvet class,” an elite whose behavior is normally kept hidden to all but themselves. (101-102)

The e-narrator’s search for a wider network of audience propels her into creating real or imaginary responses: “I’m getting many, many responses rebuking and insulting” (172). She adds that many other responses are “boring responses that try to dissect [her] personality after
every e-mail” (141). The e-narrator even claims that her subscribers are addicted to her emails. In the text, one of the subscribers responses to her emails “claim[ing] to have observed that, every Friday, starting early in the morning, her sister secludes herself in her room, in front of her computer screen,” doing nothing but waiting for Rajaa’s email (67). The narrative is self-promoting in that it quotes actual or alleged press releases that speak of the author as the person behind a strange phenomenon.

To show the impact of globalization, technology, and Internet on the life of the individual in Saudi community, in the narrative, the writer presents the four girls as women who have jobs, travel, shop, surf the web, and do instant messaging. They are wired girls, “Gamrah spent months learning how to use [computer]” (78). Then Lamees taught her how to use Internet, “little by little Gamrah got addicted to [Internet]” (153). For Lamees, her “relation with the Internet started when she was fifteen years old... But once she graduated, it wasn’t long before Lamees was spending no less than four hours every day on the Internet, 99 percent of it in random chat rooms, Yahoo, ICQ, mIRC and AOL.” (151). In the larger context, however, we have to keep in mind the substantial numbers of unwired girls in Riyadh or any Arab city.

In the novel as in day-to-day life, determination and technology have made life a little easier for young Saudis. Society cannot stop people from loving, that telephones and the Internet have facilitated this. Mobile telephones and the Internet chat rooms have made it less painful to get to know each other. In the novel, “Um Nuwayyir [the four girls’ friend] reminded [the] girls repeatedly that phone lines and Internet did exist! She pointed out that they could even converse daily, with picture and sound using a webcam and a microphone” (186). True, the way the novelist presents this idea may seems to those unfamiliar with Saudi society funny and crazy but in fact she is in line with the day-to-day life.
The girls were taking down as many phone numbers as they could. They did not have to work very hard, because these numbers were generously showered upon them by the guys. The girls could memorize those with catchy sequences and repeated digits as the guys stuck out their heads through their cars’ windows while driving and kept repeating them for the girls to write down. The girls also copied from placards the guys had hung on the windows of their cars so that girls in neighboring cars could see the numbers clearly. The truly bold knights among them held out personal business cards, passing them through the windows to be snatched up by the girls, who were every bit as brave as the aspiring Romeos. (15-16)

In Saudi society, technology and Internet have positives and negatives. It is through cell phones and the Internet that Rashid befriends Kari, the Japanese woman, which causes the separation between him and his wife, Gamrah. However, Internet is not only used for chatting and trivial objects. It is also used as a source of knowledge, “Rashid spent long hours at the university…. carrying out research on the Internet using the easy-access computers in the university library” (77). It is also through computer that Gamrah comes to know of Rashid’s affair with Kari. The e-narrator says: “Sitting at the computer… her [Gamrah’s] eyes fell on a file that appeared to hold a great many photos of an Asian woman. She was Japanese, Gamrah learned later. Her name was Kari. In some photos they were side by side. In fact, in one photo they were draped across the sofa in this very apartment in which Gamrah was living” (78). At the same time, after her divorce, it is only computer and the Internet that give her pleasure and help her pass her leisure and have new relations.
As dating is a punishable crime in Saudi Arabia, the Internet primarily lessens the importance of appearance in social interaction and facilitates romantic relations. Joel Gwynne in his article “The Lighter that Fuels a Blaze of Change,” explains that *Girls of Riyadh* offers a model of identity construction that circumnavigates the real-world constraints of gender. One particular activity worth noting is Gamrah’s IM (Instant Messaging), interaction with “Sultan”, during which she constructs for herself an entirely new identity using the handle “Pride”.

On one of those boring evenings at home, [Gamrah] met Sultan: a simple, direct, polite twenty-five-year-old guy...Talking with Sultan on the Internet was a pleasure for Gamrah, and he seemed in turn to really be interested in what she wrote to him...As the days went by, Gamrah found that talking to Sultan was better than talking to any other online friends, and he felt the same. (*Girls* 155)

Gamrah creates an identity of her own choosing. She contacts Sultan “with the name Pride and a little lie. She [tells] him she [is] a student in one of the science departments on the Malaz Campus. She [has] always felt that Malaz girls [are] smarter than Olaisha girls, since they [are] specialized in scientific fields” (155). She deceives him more and sends him an attractive photo of one of her friends claiming to be her photo.

From the moment she sent him the photo of Rashid’s sister Ghadah (or, ahem, *her* photo), Sultan had hardly left the Net for a minute. He kept after her all the time to let him talk to her over the phone. She stood firm, though. She wasn’t “that sort” of girl, she said. The more she turned him down, the more attached to her Sultan became and the more he praised and glorified her moral rectitude. (160)

Online anonymity allows Gamrah to negotiate intimate boundaries with the opposite sex. Performing alternative identities of more attractive girl allows her to attract the attention of men
and learn, through online interaction, their courtship strategies and romantic scripts in ways that would not be possible in the Saudi public sphere.

Like Gamrah, Lamees creates her own identity: “The Caterpillar,” “The Demon girl,” “Black Pearl” and “Daddy’s Sweetheart,” which help her to get fame among chatters (151). These identities enable her to “meet guys and joke around with them in a society that [does not] provide any other venue for clowning around” (152). Online interaction helps Lamees to meet “Ahmed from Riyadh... the relationship between Ahmed and Lamees somehow took the momentous and forbidden leap from the computer screen to the cell phone” (155-156). Rajaa is not justifying illegal Internet relations, but wants her people to realize that chatting is not a crime as it does not ‘cross the line’. It may help one of the chatters to find his/her forever soul mate. The experiences of Gamrah and Lamees illustrate that the Internet allows young women to experience forms of intimacy without directly contravening the sexual conduct of Islamic cultures.

This informationalization is the contribution that Girls of Riyadh makes to modern Arabic writing, even as it slips below the common in Arabic writing. The treatment of conservative ethics dominating a social order is not new to Arabic fiction. What is new is the use of a medium capable of reaching a large public. In Saudi Arabia, the Internet is not left unwatched or uncensored and the writer makes use of every rumour to promote her work as a daring venture against constraints and heavy odds: “I heard,” the writer confides, “that King Abd Al-Aziz City [Internet provider company in Saudi Arabia] is trying to block my site to dam up the channels of communication and ward off malicious acts, scandalous deeds and all causes of corruption or evil” (82). In the same confessional manner and with a greater touch of intimacy, she raises expectancy by insinuation: “I know that most of you know a thousand ways to get into blocked
sites. But I just might die of electrocution if this blockage happens before I can empty out (and load onto you) the charges—positive and negative—I carry in my chest, which have refused to balance each other out to neutral inside of me" (82). She hints ironically at the ultraconservative discourse behind this resistance to her communication: "I only ask for a small space on the World Wide Web to tell my stories through. Is that too much to ask?" (82). But this tiny space can also decentralize competing discourses with their norms, codes, and applications. While many sites are not allowed to operate, in Saudi Arabia as in other places, including the United States, it is good to know that insofar as literature is concerned, we live in an age in which the resilient nation-state and the powerful fluidity represented by the Internet must coexist. I agree with Timothy Luke who claims that "the concrete reality of space expressed in terms of a socio-cultural context of spatial location gradually is being displaced by the tangible imaginary of flow, understood in terms of iconic/symbolic access to, or process through, networks of informational circulation" (101).

Another way of reading the novel as a reflection of the impact of the Internet, technology, and globalization generally on the Saudi society is through the book’s language. The narrative appropriates the language of chat rooms and emails; it exemplifies the youth culture that comprises cyberspace, the digital world, media culture, telecommunication, and all sorts of Arab and Western pop cultures, attesting to the fact that the young generation is enmeshed in and hooked on a global culture that defies national and political borderlines. The language of the Arabic version of the novel reflects the influence of technology and globalization on Saudi people. The novel is in colloquial Arabic combining several Saudi dialects, many other Arabic dialects, and Anglicized Arabic. This signifies the modern world and particularly the impact of globalization. Marilyn Booth in her article “Translator v. Author (2007): Girls of Riyadh Go to
New York,” observes that *Girls of Riyadh* “exemplifies a phenomenon happening across the Arab world. Young Arab authors are writing in new ways using new languages, preferring cyberforms and hybrid languages associated with globalized, wired existence” (198). The novel’s politics of language consists in using some English words in the original Arabic version in order to recognize the homogeneity of communication modes and their class specificities, and above all, “to acknowledge and exploit the use of English by a young, savvy, globalized generation of Saudis” (204).

In this novel, Rajaa combines the new technology of writing with the old world of traditions and social taboos. Embodied responses from a group of nameless fictional or cyberspace readers who are addressed in the beginning of each email/chapter establish another temporality of the narrative and allude to the way in which an oral narrative always creates these immediate engagements with its audiences. The e-narrator addresses her readers: “Frankly, I did not anticipate all of this flurry, all of this back-and-forth, around my modest little e-mails! (*Girls* 75). This referential mode accentuates the effects of cyberspace which the narrative relies on.

In other words, the narrative strategies in *Girls of Riyadh* build on the Internet as the primary medium through which to reach people. It uses the Internet to ally with these girls under constraints that prevent them from leading free lives, equal in status to men. In her interview with an online Penguin Book, the author states: “I used Internet as a vehicle in my novel to portray the impact of modern communication tools on the Saudi society in the past ten years. In the conservative Saudi society, the Internet, cell phones, and Bluetooth can be as important, if not more crucial, than face-to-face communication.” The e-narrator is not so naive as to focus on this issue without writing for most chapters prologues that question ultraconservative assumptions and premises regarding Islam, the Prophet, and life in general. The quotations from
the Quran are meant to call into question statements and interpretations that make life difficult or unbearable. Other prologues and mottoes from contemporary or modern poets are drawn not only from Arabs but also from the Americans and the Europeans.

Before concluding this discussion, I would like to draw the attention to some similarities between this entire novel and Hanan Al-Shaykh’s novel *Only in London*, (a novel to be discussed in the next section). Both novelists celebrate globalization and see the West as a hospitable destination offering the promise of a better and freer life. In both novels, the Arab protagonists share the same wish to live in the West for the feeling of security, comfort, and freedom they find there. In *Girls of Riyadh*, the girls’ travelling to the West allows the young women to embrace, for example, new forms of sexual expression, as conveyed by Sadeem’s bodily transformation upon the plane’s descent to Heathrow airport: “before they began the descent at Heathrow airport, Sadeem headed for the aeroplane bathroom. She took off her *abaya* and head covering to reveal a well-proportioned body encased in tight jeans and a T-shirt, and a smooth face adorned with light pink blush, a little mascara and a swipe of lip gloss” (61). The transnational space is presented as liberating not due to an admiration of Western consumer and popular culture but, more accurately, due to the comparatively relaxed gender regimes within that space. After arriving in the UK, Sadeem befriends Tahir, a Muslim Pakistani colleague, and revels in the freedoms afforded by a non-gender segregated environment. She attends a party where “there wasn’t a single other Arab among them, so she felt free to act as if she were one of them, joking with this one and laughing with that one, and putting no constraints on herself as she normally did when she was with a group of Arabs, especially people from the Gulf and particularly Saudis” (102-103). However, this sense of freedom begins to atrophy when she comes to know that Tahir’s best friend is Firas, a Saudi man (later in the novel he becomes her
knight). Though they do not know each other, but “he [is] a Saudi, after all, and he might just stir up a storm of talk around her that could blow from London as far as Riyadh” (106). Firas is not surprised that Sadeem feels not at ease to meet him and prefers the friendship of Tahir who is not Saudi because he knows that “Saudi girls [are] more at ease mixing with men who [are] not Saudi. Firas would not be the first, or the last, to experience the shock of finding that a girl from his home country would much rather hang out with his Pakistani friend than with him” (106).

Similarly, for Michelle, the West means freedom: a value that is absent in her Saudi Society. When she reaches San Francisco International Airport, “she breathed in air saturated with moisture and freedom. People in all shapes and colors, from everywhere in the world, were flowing around her [Michelle] in every direction. No one paid any attention to her Arab-ness, or to the fact that the person standing next to her was African. Everyone was minding his own business” (134). This feeling of freedom that Michelle enjoys in the West reminds me of a contradictory scene that I have cited earlier in the discussion of this novel. The e-narrator describes the situation of Saudi girls as they go shopping. While in the West everyone is “minding his own business,” in the Saudi society “a girl can’t stroll about in the malls under the protection of God without being checked out thoroughly by everyone, especially her own kind, from her abaya to the covering over her hair to the way she walks and the bags she carries and in which direction she looks and in front of what merchandise she stops” (17). Indeed, all the girls hope to escape the limitations of their Saudi culture: “All Michelle wanted was to hear that she had been accepted in one of the schools there [in America] so that she could bundle up her belongings and turn her back on a country [Saudi Arabia] where people were governed—or herded—like animals” (113). In Girls of Riyadh, transnationality enables the girls to escape the traditional oppression in the Arab society and provides them creature comfort. Their desire to
flee Saudi culture is predicated upon the girls' awareness that their homeland, and more specifically its government, is hostile to non-Islamic ideologies and cultures and, therefore, hostile to the gender liberating possibilities enacted by and through the processes of globalization. Another similarity that will receive more attention in the next two novels is that the three novelists: Rajaa Al-Sanea, Hanan Al-Shaykh and Naomi Nye of airports and aeroplanes as metaphors for the compression of time and space.

To some conservatives, it may seem that the novel is anti-Islamic and a call for secularism. They see it as an imitation of the popular American drama “Sex and the City” that compels American women to be open about sex. In the same way, the novel blazes a trail for openness about love, and limitations presented by family and society. Thus, it is quite irresistible and thought provoking. In my considered view, the novel is a strategy to deal with experience in a globalized age. The novelist hopes for her emails to “be the matches that set [readers’] thoughts on fire, the lighter that fuels a blaze of change” (2). The novel deals with the conflict between tradition and modernity, between the stasis of Saudi Islamist tradition and the disruptive processes of a globalized technological modernity. It encourages cultural globalization in the sense that it promotes building bridges of communication between diverse cultures, but this does not mean the abandonment of one's native culture. The writer believes that living within any culture makes one absorb its pros and cons. In her interview with Penguin Book Club, Rajaa asserts that: “growing up in Saudi one gets fascinated by what one sees of the American society on TV and living in the US makes one appreciates one’s homeland more.” Both societies teach a lot and just like all girls in Riyadh, the novelist is trying to find her own terms and create her own environment for herself; an environment that treasures religion and family and rejects
unnecessary social or racial traditions. This view is conveyed in her interview with Saturday Book Club. She says:

We're living in the 21st century, and there are still traditions from the 19th century, and that's just insane... You have the Internet...and freedom of speech. You have modern schools and modern hospitals. And everything around you is digital. And yet you have to go through all this pain when you want to get married... It's my obligation to try to fix things in Saudi. I'm not trying to fix the government or Islam. What I'm trying to fix is mentality, how people think. It's the traditions.

These traditions either [need to] loosen up, or we should get rid of them.

For Rajaa, religious rules should not be negotiated, but there are secular codes of behaviour that can be questioned. She is of the view that rules of conduct are work in progress, subject to change. Arab people yield to religious laws like fasting, praying, not drinking etc. Their religious commitment disenables them to question such laws. However, the younger generation is not patient enough to tolerate unfair social diktats like women not being allowed to drive, the prohibition of love between eligible bachelors and single women, or class discrimination. The present generation refuses to blindly accept such an ancient laws. In her interview with Penguin book club, Rajaa remarks:

To some extent, when there are rules there are ways to get around them. And in Saudi there are numerous laws, both religious and social. The majority of Saudis adhere to religious laws like praying, fasting, not drinking, etc. But when it comes to social laws like females not driving or men and women not falling in innocent love, the young generation is starting to question and refuse such time honored laws.
The writer stresses the same idea of rejecting these old unfair conventions and expresses her wish to change her society in her interview with Asharq Al-Awsat Magazine:

I aspire to be the first to signal the beginning of change. These are social changes that are not connected to religion. This is why I am not anxious about discussing them through my writings. Silence is evil. I hate negativity and refuse to wait for others to act on my behalf. It is my duty to myself and to my children in the future. I fear I will mellow out with age and lose my motivation and courage, as has happened with others.

Rajaa knows that the task is not easy, but she decides to give it a try. After receiving some critical responses to her emails from her subscribers, she writes back to them: “I am forever hearing people say to me: ‘You will not reform the world and you will not change people.’ They have a point, a very good point, but what I WON’T do is to give up the attempt, like everyone else does” (Girls 57).

For Rajaa, breaking social taboos is the way to progress. It is in this sense that the novel is an appeal to positive globalization. It is a plea for free exchange of cultural mores before deciding what is destructive and what is beneficial to one’s existence in society. Censorship is a myth and it does not protect the society from external forces. Nowadays cultural exchange is already being encouraged through scholarships to other countries, through the media, and the Internet. The Arab and other societies are opening up to other cultures and learning to respect different views. The novel alternates between speaking in a strictly Arab voice and the hybrid voice of society in the grips of globalization. It articulates the adverse impact of globalization on the Arab society, even though the author’s intention is to present globalization as a positive
phenomenon. In some way, *Girls of Riyadh* reflects the changing times. It is a part of the struggle between the religious forces that have taken Saudi Arabia into cultural isolation, and the more liberal voices that have been wanting to liberate the Arab society in recent years. The novelist uses the Internet as the new medium of communication so as to reflect on what is really happening. Full of optimism that her writing may bring about some change, she wants the ‘other’ to know something about the real world of Saudi women. Rajaa writes this novel with the hope that “by the time you [readers] finish this book, you will say to yourself: Oh, yes. It is a very conservative Islamic society. The women there do live under male dominance. But they are full of hopes and plans and determination and dreams. And they fall deeply in and out of love just like women anywhere else” (viii). In short, *Girls of Riyadh* is the first Arabic novel to use digital technology to show the inappropriateness of some social traditions. In my opinion, it is an appeal to make use of the facilities brought up by globalization, the ones that simplify healthy cultural exchange and development in all spheres of life without abandoning one’s native culture and identity.

4.3. Globalization, Global City Representation, Transnationality, Sensuality, Reconciliation, Cultural Crossing, and East-West Relationship in Hanan Al-Shaykh’s *Only in London*

It pleases me to think that I [am contributing] to the removal of misunderstanding between East and West if only by as much as an iota.

(Al-Shaykh, qtd. in El-Enany’s *Arab Representations* 200)
Hanan Al-Shaykh writes with a pen that is neither East nor West but entirely her own.

(Los Angeles Times)

Almost all the contemporary Arab writers have been affected by globalization. While many oppose it strongly, Hanan Al-Shaykh is one of those few Arab writers supporting this process of globalization. She sees globalization as the shrinking of borders between cultures. She advocates the concept of a ‘universal culture’ which is a distinctive extension of Western culture, and seeks to combine Arab cultural values with core global values that promote social advancement and democracy. She believes that globalization facilitates interaction and encourages dialogue between cultures. This global interaction forms the basis of reconciliation and universalism. In all her works, her main concern is East-West’s relation. For her, home is the country where you are ‘in’, not ‘of’.

Hanan Al-Shaykh’s novel, Inhahā London yā Azizi was published in 2001, and was translated into English as Only in London in 2002 by Catherine Cobham. So, in what follows, I will refer to the book as London. In this novel, she recreates Arab expatriate life in London and presents the perception of the ‘self’ and the ‘other’ within a framework that can be seen as characteristic of the way the Arab emigre in the West generally sees himself/herself in relation to the ‘other’, indeed in a way not unlike the collective Arab perception of the self in relation to the Western other. Shortlisted for the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize in 2002, Al-Shaykh’s novel Only in London “reflects her great sensitivity not only to human nature in its universal phenomena but also in the cultural imprints of society. A delicate line of comparison is drawn
here between the East and the West” (Jayyusi 675-676). In spite of her advocacy of a global culture that is a modification of the Western culture, Al-Shaykh is not naive and admirer of the Western culture. She hopefully writes to bring about some changes that help narrow the gap between the East and the West.

Central to Al-Shaykh’s question of the East-West relation is her presentation of the physical and symbolic significance of cities. Al-Shaykh’s work suggests that the literary representation of cities depends on the existence of a cosmopolitan culture. I approach this section with a number of questions in mind. How does Al-Shaykh perceive her new homeland? Can Arab migrants cross the line and be friendly with the English? And how do Al-Shaykh and her Arab protagonists negotiate and find their own niche within London’s urban spaces? To answer these questions, this section presents a reading of *Only in London*. My aim is to show how through her female protagonist Lamis, Al-Shaykh has attempted a cultural crossing. However, before all, it is obligatory to have a look at the synopsis of the story.

As the title suggests, the novel is set primarily in London. Its characters are partly Arabs, partly English, with a majority of the first, who come from different national backgrounds. For example, the novel depicts the lives of two women—a Moroccan prostitute, Amira, and an Iraqi refugee, Lamis—and a gay male transvestite from Beirut, Samir. A fourth character, Nicholas, a white Englishman who works as an art dealer for Sotheby’s and moves between London and Oman. Al-Shaykh handles this diversity of characters through a traditional narrative, adopting the viewpoint of an omniscient author, who moves freely through a multiplicity of parallel plots and the consciousness of the characters that populate them. Al Shaykh’s novel focuses on three immigrants who have struggled against poverty. The characters know each other and occasionally meet across their respective plots, but their liaison is not of an organic nature, in the
sense that each of the main protagonists has his or her own story independently of the others. The event that brings them together in the first place is their passage from Dubai to London on a flight.

Right from the very first line of the novel, the novelist presents a snapshot view of the main characters while they are still all on their aeroplane moving from Dubai to London. We are first allowed a peep into the character of Amira, a Moroccan prostitute who is driven by poverty in her home country to London. On her arrival in London, she decides to make use of “her body and men and wealth” (London 169). She works as prostitute, pretends to be a princess so as to cheat/fraud rich Arabs who come to London for worldly-pleasure, namely, sexual pleasure. The book’s main character, Lamis is a divorcee from Iraqi whose childhood poverty leads her to a loveless marriage to a wealthy old Iraqi man in order to save her family from the clutches of poverty. When we first meet her, she is travelling to London to live in her flat given by her ex-husband and to start a new life. The third Arab character is Samir, a Lebanese gay individual who comes to London because of economic hardship. More than money, for Samir London is the place that grants him the freedom to lead his life as a gay. Al-Shaykh intends to present these weary and sorrowful Arab characters as victims of the Arab communities across the Middle East. The fourth, non-Arab character is Nicolas, an Englishman who moves between Oman and London as an expert in oriental antiques. He falls in love with Lamis at their very first meeting on the aeroplane.

On their arrival in London, everyone has his/her own separate set of experiences. Amira befriends Samir, and Lamis begins love affair with Nicolas. Although all the three Arab characters descend from different countries and different backgrounds, they all share one common unifying factor they all had poor and difficult childhood. They come to London to
escape poverty, and the sexual restrictions of their societies. They come with the hope of a new life characterized by the freedom to do whatever they want, whenever they want, and wherever they want.

The greatest single unifying factor in the novel is in fact the setting: London. London is not just a geographical location, but a metonymic metaphor for a value. The characters perceive this value to be missing from the Arab geographical locations from which they came: a value called freedom. In the picture that Al-Shaykh paints, London gives each of them, different as they are, the freedom to do what they want, to fulfil themselves, to be emancipated from censorship, be it social, religious, political, or sexual; the endless censorships restrict their every move and thought in their native environments. London liberates them from all of that. And it is from the tug-of-war between internal home-grown inhibitions and the sense of release they experience in London that action of the novel arises. That London should have that value for her characters is hardly surprising since admittedly it has held the same value for Hanan Al-Shaykh herself, who argues that it was London that made it possible for her to write her fiction, and that she might have not been able to write the way she did in Beirut: “London eggs you on, it makes you feel you are living in a healthy atmosphere, free of repression . . . Because I live in London I have come to know myself as I really am... in London you come to know who you are; you shed off your outer shell and see yourself as if in front of a mirror” (qtd. in El-Enany 198).

Al-Shaykh affirms her support of the globalization model in two ways: first through her rejection of a national identity. She acknowledges that part of her is Lebanese, but another part, she asserts, is British. In an interview with Christiane Schlote, Hanan says: “I don’t feel like a Londoner or Lebanese at all. Yes, I am Lebanese in a way. But I don’t feel I’m half English or anything. But I feel that in a way, there is a place in London which I belong to . . . If I would feel
Londoner or Lebanese, I wouldn’t exist.” These identities are not in opposition to one another, having, rather, a complementary effect on her. The second is her commitment to questioning the category of identity itself. Sally Nasib Al-Karmi in her “Many Kinds of Strong Voices,” states that identity for Al-Shaykh is “a problematic construction that is always apt to change. [Al-Shaykh] does not perceive it as an entity that is singularly constructed. Relations with one’s family, home, country, nationality and personal experiences are all elements which, taken together, constitute one’s multiple identities” (163).

*Only in London* establishes the right of Arab women to move, change homelands, and travel independently across cultures. Al-Shaykh regards migration, departure, and mobility as constructive symptoms of interaction. She believes that the subject has the freedom to negotiate more than one space at the same time. She opines in what is called “double consciousness” (Hall 30). Al-Shaykh strongly believes that the co-presence of different cultures should encourage healthy cultural exchange so that “the world is not divided up neatly into particular distinct cultures wedded to every community. People need access to cultural meanings in order to live a life that is meaningful...” (26). Her hope, that there is the possibility of dialogue between cultures, reveals her coming to terms with herself and with her identity. In the novel, the reader is left with the hope best expressed by Nicholas’s father who tells his son that “there is a willingness for dialogue, whatever the religion, whatever the nationality” (*London* 79).

Hybrid identity is the novelist’s vision. She sees hybrid identity, constituted by one’s association with the major institutions of a civilized society, and one’s geographical locations, as being facilitated by globalization. A major theme of the novel to be discussed here is Hanan Al-Shaykh’s representation of the city (not as a geographical space, but as a value) and its impact on people. In *Only in London*, Hanan represents London as a global city of reconciliation, and as a
symbol of globalization and freedom. In this novel, London as a value has influenced the writer in a good way that it promotes her cultural point of view to narrow the gap between the Arab and the Western worlds. For a writer like Al-Shaykh, empowered by global vision, the city is so powerful that it gets anthropomorphised. It has a personality and a life of its own. Through encounters with the city, women build up strong relationships with their surroundings in an attempt to define and negotiate their cultural spaces. For Hanan, home/homeland and the feeling of belonging are not related to definite geographical places. Home can be found in multiple locations. Like Virginia Woolf, she feels that her "country is the whole world" (197). In her outlook, I would argue that home is the place which tolerates and promotes various perspectives, changing conventions, and cultural differences. Maya Jaggi in her article "Conflicts Unveiled" has cited Al-Shaykh as saying: “my life has been in stages: Beirut to Cairo to the Gulf to London. When you move from one place to another you recreate yourself; you become another person, no matter how strong you are.” Al-Shaykh’s literary project about border-crossing and cultural mediation has developed this interest into a wider cosmopolitan perspective, where life in London now has a positive impact on her cultural vision. Moreover, she recognizes her literary mission of trying to build bridges between the Arab and Western worlds. This is reflected in her novels in the ongoing references to embassies and airports as spaces for cultural mixture. Embassies and airports which are sites within cities are essential components of Al-Shaykh’s novels. Airports represent cross-road spaces for easy communication, where people have shared destinies. The aeroplane metaphor carries an important implication at the beginning of Only in London. Christiane Schlote writes, “the plane serves as the perfect metaphor for the shrinking of distances ...and has played a significant role in the increased migration worldwide.” The aeroplane, like London, brings the four main characters together and becomes a symbol of
globalization and modern age, reconnecting the characters’ past with their present, and narrowing the vast spaces not only between cultures, but also between human beings. It is the ‘in-between’ space where people’s various differences are submerged.

Al-Shaykh personifies the city by representing the influence it has on people regardless of their backgrounds. In her interview with Schlote she remarks:

I noticed that all the years I have been living in London, subconsciously, I have been thinking of the city and how it has received and is still receiving immigrants. Whether they come because of poverty and economic reasons or because of political reasons. They are like a pot full of ingredients, full of reasons. Mainly, they either try to change their lives or continue in this country. But, inevitably, they really change, no matter how they are holding on to their traditions. [...] Ultimately, they change. The city makes them change.

The writer here does not focus on the city as geographical space, but on the impact it has on its people.

Al-Shaykh thus fails to present a comprehensive view of London as a geographical location, as a rhetorical construct born out of imperial ideology, and as a stimulus of certain kinds of experience. The author allows her perception of London to permeate her fiction, losing the opportunity to present London as a site of material conditions, ideological representation, and experiential complex. The city acts on the characters and forces them to remember it in certain specific ways. Al-Shaykh endows the city with the power to evoke certain positive experiences. In the text, London helps Lamis in her search for her identity, assists her to surmount her lonely life, and to commence a new life filled with confidence, love, and energy. Again Al-Shaykh
attributes to London a certain expressiveness, which she communicates through her character, Lamis:

I... see London like an outstretched palm, like something lying in front of me without a past or a present, or like the past holding the present in its grasp: the Tower of London, the river and the South Bank—all in one view, without foreigners, accents, languages, the Queen, homeless people, traffic wardens; and to see the whole place disappear when I put my hands over my eyes, and when I took them away again, to see a spot of colour—children playing basketball in a school playground, dots of colour, their skin and clothes all mixed up. (London 266)

Analyzing the above passage, Sally Nasib Al-Karmi observes that Al-Shaykh celebrates the city as “a centre for cultural tolerance” (188). Al-Karmi writes that the Arab marginalized people like Lamis wish to live in a world where the boundaries of race, wealth, and gender fuse. This is reflected through connecting the eye with the hand. There is a cultural language where “action speaks louder than words.” Whereas the human eye can differentiate between individuals, hands often help connect people of diverse nations. The state of detachment in our modern world is reflected through Lamis’s covering and reopening her eyes. Both the writer and the protagonist desire to live like children who attach no importance to rigid boundaries. They wish to live in a world where no one is superior and no one is inferior.

In the narrative, it is the British Telecom tower which is a part of the city that helps Lamis to be self-confident. It is only after her visit to the BT tower that Lamis becomes capable of coming to terms with her English with an Arabic accent, gains more self-confidence, and moves to Oman to look for her Western lover, “now she realized how the sun lit London, and
that the sky was a protective skin. At any moment she expected to see God in human form, as he appeared in religious paintings, the light descending from his fingers like rods of water" (London 264). Indeed, the novelist makes the BT tower a symbol of hope. It is “like a light house [to] a lost ship” (263). She allies Lamis with the latter, and London with the light house that guides her.

For the three Arab protagonists of the novel, city [London] means freedom, as each understands it. Economic relations structure the experiences of the three Arab characters in this novel and set their migrations in motion. However, when they reach London their lives change drastically, because of their feeling of protection and security. They find themselves in the whirlpool of day-to-day experiences, but the one common feeling that London evokes is freedom. In the text, Amira grew up neglected, poor, and dirty. She is the daughter of a water-seller and a mother who refused to come up with the trousseau needed to marry her off to a wealthy man. However, in London, “the water seller's daughter is now a princess with a British passport” (141). Amira is a globalized woman who believes that "everything in life has a price"(168). Her poverty and repression in her native place and culture enforces her “to think seriously about her body and men and wealth” leading to her career choice (168-169). She is a high-class prostitute in her late thirties who, realizing that her charms are fading as her body is bloating, decides to pass herself off as a princess in an elaborate scheme to rip off rich Arab men. It seems as if, on the one hand, the Arab society has travelled en masse to central London with relations of power intact, yet Amira also capitalizes on the recognition that "circumstances altered the nature of men's fantasies. In London, what drew them was the notion of a woman who had been hidden away in the dark, wrapped in a black veil, like a packet of dates or henna” (75). Her scams work not only because of people's desire to be connected to royalty but also because the diasporic context means that her identity cannot be so easily verified and is thus more fluid.
As she points out, "everything was possible when you were abroad. You could recreate yourself with a name and parents of your own choosing" (113-114). In other words, coming to London from a life of poverty and abuse in a Moroccan village, Amira finds refuge, opportunity, independence, and freedom in London, all of which she had been deprived of as a poor and uneducated Arab woman in a repressive patriarchal society. An adventuress who aims high in her liaisons, she thrives on ensnaring oil-rich Arabs in London’s most opulent hotels by pretending to be a libidinous Arabian princess. There is delightful comedy here and is not entirely without social and political connotations, but the reader is left puzzled at what London means to her in the wider context of this London-idealising work. Is it just an open space for escapade and class revenge through every available means, legitimate, or illegitimate? Although Amira rebels against both the class and gender structure of the Arab world, her engaging in prostitution as a tool of avenging against both patriarchy and poverty defies all the moralistic conceptions.

Samir’s experience in London is parallel to Amira’s. He finally has a chance to reveal his homosexuality in London and create his own means of freedom. Samir’s arrival in London is also connected to dubious economic transactions and a need to redefine his unacceptable identity in the Arab world. Like Amira, Samir suffered poverty as a child in Beirut. Samir finds in London a haven not so much for its economic possibilities, as for the sexual freedom London offers him. London turns him from being the reviled ‘queer’, temporarily incarcerated in a mental hospital to cure him of his ‘disease’, into a normal human being whose different sexuality is accepted by society and whose right to be different is protected by law. After two months of being in London, "he felt he belonged there and nowhere else, and he missed nobody." not even his children (149). Despite the exclusion he encounters because of his nationality and sexuality, he walks the city
streets feeling that “London was freedom” (149). Samir’s delight consists more in discovering the true meaning of London to which he had come with pre-conceived ideas: “Back home people thought that London was walking in the mist wrapped in a heavy coat and a furry pair of boots . . . and that London was Piccadilly Circus, Oxford Street, Big Ben and Buckingham Palace” (149). The writer also adds that the sole reason for that is not Samir’s performing his transvestite identity but also his other civil liberties.

He was doing what he always wanted to do: make people laugh... London was freedom. It was your right to do anything, anytime. You did not need to undergo a devastating war in order to be freed to do what you wanted, and when you did do what you wanted, you did not have to feel guilty or embarrassed, and start leading a double life and ultimately end up frustrated. (149)

Thereby, despite all the disputes on identity, Al-Shaykh’s protagonist claims that the duplicity of the self arises from the oppression of the community, the location where one is supposed to belong, but does not. Al-Shaykh’s characters walk the diaspora experience in a host land on its head. Not only is their acculturation total, they are also totally averse to the very idea of returning to their homeland. The ‘host’ becomes home in the perception of these characters who radically redefine the notion of ‘home’ for themselves. Is the acculturation of these characters marked by the least amount of resistance, a result of globalization? Is the near-total suppression of pleasurable, positive memories of the old ‘home’ which tends to surface even in those who occupied the margins of their society in the erstwhile home suggests a narrative that is totally based on a purely personal even idiosyncratic experience? Questions like these confront even the most sympathetic of Al-Shaykh’s readers.
In the novel, Samir and Amira regard London as home, a space where they can be part of the mainstream even though they are expatriates, which is in line with what Avtar Brah in her *Cartographies of Diaspora* calls “a psychic geography of space” where they are allowed the freedom of the country they are in but not of. They regard their transnational situatedness as a space where they can belong to their own Arab community, yet be their genuine selves, and not forced into an authentic existence. Whether Lamis can transform from her transnational space and become of England is doubtful.

Al-Shaykh wants to say that transnationality enables Amira and Samir to escape the traditional oppression in the Arab society and provides them with freedom. But is it ‘freedom’ in the true sense of the term? Likewise, the revolt against the oppressive patriarchy that involves lowering of one’s self-esteem strikes the reader as a questionable act. Unfortunately, there are few moments in the novel where the characters step back from their life and examine it critically. Patriarchy that is evident in prostitution is not transformed into a progressive ideology in just being located in the so-called ‘free’ world! In my view point, Al-Shaykh does not success in her fabrication of characters like the ones discussed in this novel as real representatives of the Arab society as a whole. These characters seek to take revenge against the oppression in their home societies through the act of lowering of self-esteem, namely adultery and homosexuality which are prohibited in almost all religions. I think a sober-minded writer like Al-Shaykh could manage to present her criticism of the Arab society in a way that doesn’t contradict with or violate religious values. For example, the novel could gain more seriousness and success if the writer reflects the real reasons behind the Arabs’ migration to the West such as the lack of work opportunities in their home societies, the absence health insurance, the absence of freedom of self-expression in a highly humanly manner, and so forth. However, in the texts, the three Arab
protagonists come to London in search of worldly and physical freedom only. Amira is a prostitute who sells her body to the highest bidder; Samir leaves his society and children to practice his homosexuality; and even Lamis is represented as unhappy with her Arab husband. Though her Arab husband provides her with luxurious life in London, she feels happy only after she meets Nicolas, the English man and lover. Al-Shaykh presents Lamis as unhappy in her martial life with her Iraqi husband, but happy with having illegal sex with the Englishman. Thus, I can say that Al-Shaykh presents a negative image of the Arab citizen and society at large. Her depiction of such characters reminds one of a novel called *The Discovery of Lust* (2005) by the Algerian novelist Fadella Al Farouq. The novelist in this work represents martial life as jail for Arab woman, but extra-marital sex especially for woman is an act of liberation and freedom.

Returning to the novelist’s representation of the city and its impact on people, in *Only in London*, the relation to the city streets, transportation, and particular venues-high-class hotels, theaters, the British Telecom tower-as well as to the private spaces of home and body symbolize the protagonists’ struggle to find places for themselves and to remake their sense of identity in a world that has uprooted them and attempted to sell them off to the highest bidder. The image of the Arab women wearing their gowns has become a common sight on the streets of London, “the English streets and stores filled up with black abayas and veils trailing perfumes that lingered but never blended with the stale London air” (*London* 216). Though the Arab women walk on the streets of London, the smell of their perfumes and the London air are not yet parts of the experience of London streets. But such an integration is not yet a distinct possibility. This suggests the idea that two different cultures though historically separate, hold the hope of synthesis. Thus, transnationalism is the conception of diasporic experience without the traditional categories of understanding a conception that creates poignant waves in the fluidity of
identity construction. Despite the feelings of guilt enforced by their traditional backgrounds, Al-Shaykh’s characters feel London to be their home. For them, home is where there is a sense of “feeling at home” (Brah 4). They are able to reconstitute their identities in ways they have desired “only in London.”

Another important issue to be addressed is Al-Shaykh’s treatment of the East-West relation. In the entire novel, this notion is represented through the love story between the Arab woman, Lamis, and the English man, Nicolas. In addition to being allotted relatively more space in the book than the other two plots (of Amira, the Moroccan prostitute, and Samir, the Lebanese homosexual), it is the only story that seriously addresses the issue of global reconciliation, and cultural encounter. Lamis falls in love with Nicholas, the English Arabist and antiques expert who works for Sotheby’s, the art auctioneers. He is well connected with wealthy Arabs, and moves between London and Oman. Al-Shaykh uses this complex relationship of Nicholas and Lamis to symbolize and embody the relationship between the ‘self’ and the ‘other,’ which is also the relationship between the East and the West. Al-Shaykh represents the East as a woman (Lamis), and the West as a man (Nicolas). Unlike the writers of the postcolonial period who represent the East as man with the motivation to take revenge of the Western colonizers by having sexual encounter with a Western woman, Al-Shaykh creates her Arab female protagonist characters not with the notion of revenge and hostility but to seek freedom with the assistance of the Western man, and to narrow the gap between the two inconsistent cultures. Tayeb Salih’s Season of Migration to the North which was translated by Denys Johnson-Davies (1969), A Sparrow from the East (1938) by Tawfeek Al-Hakeem, and Yousef Idris’s Tales of Encounter: Three Egyptian Novellas translated by Rasheed El-Enany (2012) are some of the many Arabic works written in the postcolonial period and which embody the Easterners’ view and attitude
towards the West. These writers produced their works in an era of postcolonialism that is why, they create their protagonists with the idea of hostility. The protagonists in these works are Arab men who have sexual affair with the Western women. By this they embody the idea of the colonized taking revenge of the colonizer. Rasheed El-Enany in his book *Arab Representations of the Occident* observes that writers like these have developed a "very rational and appreciative" view towards the Western ‘other’. To them, the Western becomes both “an object of love and hate, a shelter and a threat, a usurper and a giver, an enemy to be feared and a friend whose help is to be sought” (2). Al-Shaykh has maintained this idea in an interview: “I’m from a younger generation. For those [aforesaid] writers the West is always foreign women their heroes desire and on whom they want to wreak revenge for colonialism” (qtd. in Jaggi). Indeed, Al-Shaykh explores the relationship between East and West through a sexual encounter, but she goes against the grain of tradition established by earlier male authors, the East in her work is represented by a woman and the West by a man. The implication of this role reversal has not been fully explored by Al-Shaykh’s critics. In refusing to fall into the trap of reverse sexism, the equation of the colonizer with the feminine and the colonized with the masculine, a gesture that leaves the power relation between the sexes intact, the author reveals her progressive stance vis-à-vis man-woman relation.

The extent to which the relationship between the East and the West is successful is shown through the novelist’s depiction of Lamis’s consciousness that shifts between the present and the past, thereby allowing the reader to witness the sense of freedom and security, the emotional and sexual fulfillment she experiences with the English ‘other’ against the lack of these very essentials from her former life in the shadow of an oriental husband. Lamis is ill-disposed towards her native Arab culture which had imposed on her the unhappiness of an unequal
marriage. She appears to have lost faith in that culture and desirous of embracing the culture of
the other. For that end she lays down a practical programme: to acknowledge that Britain has
become her country; to “learn English properly... to make friends with some English people... to
stop eating Arab food” by way of more radically severing herself from her native roots (London
19). She even intends to stop wearing black kohl on her eyes because it “makes [her] feel safe
and reminds [her] of childhood and home” (19). Lamis’s decision to Anglicize herself comes
only after she meets Nicolas. Though her prospect for a new life would not be possible without
her “precious British passport”, it is her sexual relationship with Nicolas that opens to her a new
world (2). Her relationship with an Englishman helps her to overcome her feeling of loneliness
and to “discover the other London—or Londons—that the native Londoners knew and lived in”
(55). She stops taking taxis, for riding means hiding in those ‘security blanket[s]” (56). She starts
walking around to study a minute feature of the city. Also having conversations with Londoners
helps her “stretch boundaries” (55). When she pays a visit to the BT tower (which I mentioned
earlier), “she [feels] herself in her bedroom” (265). This reflects the sense of comfort and
security. Moreover, in her attempt to be a Londoner and to completely forget her Arab homeland,
Lamis convinces herself that English accent is “the key” (53). However, in the story, it is
Nicholas, that loving, understanding other, who restores to her her confidence in herself and
culture, the Arab culture she had denied in her eagerness to free herself from repression. On one
occasion, when he shows her a rare Arabic manuscript, she is surprised to be able to make out
the calligraphy easily, and feels proud of the old traditions of the Arabic language that have
barely changed in hundreds of years, and of the civilization behind it: she “... felt a sharp pang
of regret that... she’d thought that being an Arab was an obstacle in her life” (125). Thus, later,
she realizes that it is foolish to suppress one’s language and culture and that successful
integration lies in reconciling opposite parts of one’s personal history. Accepting who she is makes Lamis self-fashioning in her country of choice a natural and a smooth process. At the end, Lamis enjoys both worlds: on the one hand, she starts “exercising the power that [comes] from living [in London]” (260). On the other, she learns anew to cherish her Arabic language and roots.

In her representation of the East-West relationship, Al-Shaykh portrays the eastern character as oppressed women seeking freedom with the help of the Western other. In the text, this idea is conveyed through the incident in which Nicholas finds Lamis’s lost passport in the aeroplane. She feels that “the Englishman had given her back her life” (2). The relief one feels when an important document is lost and found, the gratitude one feels for the finder, resonates with meaning in the context of the novel. Also when she reaches her apartment, “she collapsed on the floor, intending to kiss it as she’d thought of doing when she landed at Heathrow, like an exile returning home” (7). This feeling of inferiority that originates in her homeland; and the feeling of security that she enjoys in London make Lamis very eager to have a relationship with any Englishman and she blames herself for living in London for ten years during which she has had no relationship with any Westerner. She asks herself: “how is it that I don’t know a single English person to invite for a cup of tea, or a beer? They are out of bounds to me, just like the city” (13). After meeting Nicolas, Lamis is very thirsty to have an affair with him. She is presented as the slave who is ready to do whatever she could to please her English master/sexual partner. This feeling of inferiority is because “the culture of the self loses ground to the culture of the other” (El-Enany 7). Another scene in which cultural inferiority and self-hatred is reflected is when Amira tells the car rental company: “I want an English driver. Not Indian English, Arab English, African English, Chinese English, Polish English, Scots English or Irish English.
English one hundred percent with a cap and jacket" \textit{(London} 114). The colonial mindset is also reflected in Lamis’s assumption that Arab women can have relationship with the English only through physical contact. This is presented in the narrative through the Arab women’s relation with their male English doctor:

Mr Collins was the gynecologist. He was the one who knew she’d remained a virgin after her husband’s early attempts at making love, and he knew when she lost her virginity, and when she became pregnant. He witnessed her stomach swelling month by month, and he learned where she came from and who her family were, and he guided another Arab out of her; an English hand plunging inside her, acting as a mediator between her, her offspring and her husband. …A special relationship grew up between Arab women and their doctors, the only British who came into contact with their bodies. (17)

Sally Nasib Al-Karmi asserts that Al-Shaykh’s novel represents the connection between the two cultures through physical contact between Arab women and Western men. She views the free movement of the English doctor's hand on the Arab woman’s body in two ways. In one way, the hand refers to the Western colonizers who move freely in the Arab land (women’s body), and hence this body refers to the Arab colonized land. In the other way, the physical contact between the English male doctor and the Arab woman’s body is a promotion of the novelist’s view that the Arab women are seeking freedom through the agency of the English man. This interpretation is an embodiment of Gayatri Spivak’s famous, ironic statement, “white men are saving brown women from brown men” (2204). The novelist in this book attempts to override these feelings of superiority and inferiority that dominate the relationship between the East and the West, between the ‘self’ and the ‘other’, and for which Rasheed El-Enany holds the culture of the self.
responsible. The relationship between Lamis and Nicolas which is a thriving one, suggests that Al-Shaykh is hopeful of people from different cultures breaking the barrier to create a hybrid culture through their peaceful coexistence.

The notion of the history of colonialism and imperialism is dominating not only in the Arab characters’ mind, but also in the Westerners’. When Nicolas sees Lamis for the first time, he views her as nothing but an exotic and erotic adventure:

He looked back at her for longer than he meant to, thinking of the naked Devedasis he’ed seen two days before in the stillness of the temple at Khajuraho, with their seductive bodies, full breasts, bracelets on their arms and ankles, rings in their ears, girdles around their waists and ties that hung down at the back – whether they were sitting, standing, looking straight ahead or to one side, with their hair flowing or their faces raised, they evoked desire. (2)

The Arab identity is reified and eroticized, and one can see the system of representation that Edward Said, called ‘Orientalism’. Nicholas sees Lamis, the Arab woman as nothing but an erotic body that can give him pleasure.

In her interview with Paula W, Sunderman, Al-Shaykh remarks that “misunderstanding comes from ignorance and not being aware of important differences rather than from being prejudiced” (300). She asserts that dialogue is the key word to clearing cultural misunderstanding. In the same interview she says: “what bothers me is that people, whether in the West or the East, do not try to take the time to understand other’s culture” (300). In the novel, Nicolas’s misunderstanding of Lamis leads him to leave her and move to Oman, and his general fear or misunderstanding of the Arab women springs from his failure to understand the Arab
women. Although he frequently visits Arab countries, he is not in touch or dialogue with them, and as a consequence of this ignorance, he typecasts Arab women. He even thinks that “he is not supposed to make eye contact with [Lamis], because [she is] an Arab woman and [she has] been stamped with a skull and crossbones, and the words ‘Danger, Keep Off’” (London 105-106). However, the author gives the solution to this problem when Nicolas himself asserts that if he learns the Arabic language, he will be able “to solve the enigma of their personalities, their customs, and culture” (48). This reflects the significance the novelist gives to dialogue as the key word to building bridges with other alien culture. Nicholas realizes that his failure to understand Arab women and culture generally is a fault of his own culture. He tells Lamis:

The more contact I have with other cultures, the more I find us naïve. We really don’t understand the political situation in your country. And the more I travel, the more I discover ways in which we English are odd. In my childhood, I thought we were quite normal; yet now I think of the English as being introverted, shy, clumsy. We lack self-assurance. We have so many taboos – over money, wealth, religion, and especially sex. (161)

However, the possibility of bridging the cultural distance between their different cultures is highlighted in more than one occasion in the novel. One of the episodes that present the notion of reconciliation is the accidental meeting of Lamis with Nicolas in the museum. She guides him through the museum: “she knew the walls of the tour of Leighton House Museum, and the steps and doors, like a blind man who has found out by repetition and practice how to avoid the pitfalls” (64). Both Lamis and Nicolas are flesh-and-blood characters and bearers of two different positions in colonial relations. At the end of the novel, the writer symbolically presents
the relationship between Lamis and Nicholas as a successful relation that overcomes their differences and cultural barriers.

As stated above, in short time, Lamis falls in love with Nicolas, yet knowing each other better does not improve their relation since Lamis’s identity is fluid and “will always be contingent” (Craft 155). Doris Sommer argues that “transculturation” or “creativity derived from antagonism” results in “double consciousness” (173). Following Brah, Linda J. Craft also maintains that diasporic identities “no longer have to be diluted by assimilation, but rather can be strengthened and, at the same time, nuanced through an ongoing process of negotiation, adaptation and remembering. In short, one needs not lose oneself to find” (155). In the same vein, yet slightly, Connie D. Griffin points out that: “the politics of location that arises in contemporary women’s self-representational narratives ... is not merely one of location or dislocation, but, rather, the co-existence of the two as the marginalized subject shuttles back and forth between them to weave a sense of self within a perceived position of absence” (321). Lamis experiences the co-existence of location and dislocation. She has to relocate herself more than once: she moves from oppression in Iraq to Lebanon, then to London to her husband’s Arab community and finally she manages to locate herself in London as an independent woman.

Al-Shaykh unveils that the Lamis—Nicolas’s relation is fragmented because of Lamis’s traditional Arab background and her feeling of guilt. Lamis cannot wholly leave her flat and move to Nicolas’s house, cannot dare to introduce him to Khalid, her son, and cannot travel with him to Oman. This causes Lamis to suffer for a long time until she gathers enough courage to join him. Lamis is convinced that being European equals being confident. She wants “very much to be confident and European” (London 158). To say it differently, despite her British passport, Lamis struggles to find a sense of "home" in London. Lamis’s quest for herself not only leads to
a relationship with Nicholas, about whom she wonders at times whether he sees her, as do his friends, as "an Arab-Iraqi-rather than as a person," but also to the necessity of seeing herself and London from a new perspective (160). The novel makes numerous references to the ways that both characters see themselves and London through the eyes of others. Nicholas recalls how, when he first came to the city after studying at Oxford, he saw London through the eyes of a previous lover. The difficulty he and Lamis have in seeing each other symbolizes the othering that the experience of migration to the global city produces. Seeing herself in a disassociated or dislocated manner, Lamis finds it difficult to walk in the city streets and could not stop taking the bus or the tube, despite the fact that she recognizes that a "taxi was not a security blanket, or a buoy to hitch up to in the city. She wouldn't get lost. She had eyes and ears. She could read the names of the streets and understand directions. She could wander about, stop and eat somewhere" (56-57). Yet she does none of these things and "only relaxed when she saw a taxi for hire and was safely inside it" (57). Her sense of displacement is too obvious to miss when she goes to the theater in the Strand and watches herself meeting Nicholas in the foyer and, once inside, finds herself watching "two plays, one on the stage, and the other acted out in her mind" (179). All of this is because the guilt complex which revisits her as any other Arab woman whenever she tries to break the Arab traditional rules. Indeed, Lamis "had a British passport, and despite of this she felt the country was remote from her, that she was still on the margins" (267).

Only when she is able to overcome this split vision, which comes from her experience of displacement, Lamis is able to feel a sense of belonging in London and in the world, as well as within herself. This shift in perspective is enacted symbolically at the end of the novel when she finally convinces the officials at the British Telecom tower to let her "see London from above"
because the tower guides and illuminates her way (266). By gaining a different perspective and a more unified vision, Lamis is able to piece together London and her life:

She saw herself in her bedroom, looking out at the tower, and looking back from the tower to the bedroom. There she was, a pebble stuck in midstream, no longer carried along by the current. Nobody stared out of the window like that so earnestly, except a lonely stranger willing herself to fly out and alight in those places that she observed so often, places that gave her the feeling that their inhabitants would welcome visitors coming to sit on their sofas, and at the end of the visit would wave them off; she saw herself without a roof over her head, and with no income, and she imagined herself summoning her courage and entering the flower shop she had always admired and asking for a job in it. (265)

Recognizing after her visit to the British Telecom tower that she "was in another world," Lamis feels she is "just waking from her sleep in London" (267). When she has achieved this more complete vision, which encompasses the different aspects of her identity, Lamis is able to take control of her life, without her mother, her husband, or indeed Nicholas, and obtain a job, enroll in college and, significantly, ride the tube, as she moves away from the marginality of life on the surface of London and finds places for herself in her city/London.

Through Lamis and Nicolas’s relation, Al-Shaykh expresses her vision of crossing boundaries. She boldly suggests sex as an act that cements the gap between two different cultures. She challenges and casts aside the religious values and patterns which consider pre-martial, extra-marital, and same-sex relations as taboos. Lamis’s development of her personal and cultural identity is intimately related to her sexual life. Her acculturation is couched in the
image of nudity “without kohl her eyes were naked” (20). Syrine Hout, in her article “Redefining Identity, Home, and Family in Hanan Al-Shaykh's Only in London,” expresses that it is Lamis’s sexual affair with Nicolas that represents “the ultimate dissolution of boundaries separating her from the English ‘other’” (40). In the text, London is compared to Lamis’s body. “London after the cinema was waiting for a sign from Lamis before it stepped out of its dress and stood naked before her, and Lamis was waiting for a similar sign from Nicholas. The trees and houses and office blocks had suddenly become London. She was with an Englishman and so, like him, she could feel an indulgence bred of familiarity towards her surroundings” (London 96).

In the novel, like London, Lamis’s body plays a crucial role in the unification of the two different cultures. In other words, rediscovering her body with the help of Nicolas after years of sexual frustration and masturbation runs parallel to rediscovering London. Lamis’s relation with Nicolas has changed her life completely and her intimate affair with him becomes her way to escape her mental frustration and perfect means to resist patriarchal life she suffers from with her ex-husband.

They were lovers. Lovers’ breath is hot, their eyes lock in a permanent, fiery dialogue, their saliva runs, they breathe loudly through their noses, their chests are as fragile as glass and threaten to shatter when they inhale and exhale... She felt that each part of her was stretching into life in front of what she used to fear the most, men... she found herself standing completely naked in front of the mirror of reality – Nicholas – and feeling like a child who, upon seeing herself for the first time, becomes aware only by degrees, with a few moments of doubt and fear, that the image in the mirror is really her. (126-127)
For Al-Shaykh, sex is a double-edged sword. It provides Amira with money, but keeps her away from the real contact with the English. On the contrary, for Lamis sex is the epitome of the undiscovered cultural landscape. She experiences even a different sense, "a delicious smell, not his [Nicolas’s] skin, or soap, or a smell left behind by the fabric of his shirt, but a new smell – the smell of a chest without hair, an English smell" (102).

Hanan Al-Shaykh brings freshness to this long-established tradition of Arabic fiction. Her characters are flesh and blood people. Through their physical acts, she tries to portray a portrait that attempts to see the other not as such, but as ultimately similar, as ultimately not unlike the self, as a companion not an antagonist. As she herself puts it, "it pleases me to think that I [am contributing] to the removal of misunderstanding between East and West if only by as much as an iota" (qtd. in El-Enany 200). In so doing, Al-Shaykh belongs to her age as her predecessors belonged to theirs. Arab writers like Salih, Idrees, and others wrote under or in the aftermath of colonialism when the European ‘other’ was the opponent of the ‘self’ in its struggle for independence. By contrast, Al-Shaykh writes in the age of Arab defeatism when Arab societies and their ruling regimes have failed in achieving liberty and dignity for their citizens in the post-independence era. She writes in the age of the Arab diaspora in the West in search of opportunity and freedom. Europe had become a refuge place and a protector, rather than a coercive colonial power, and it is no wonder that we encounter in her work this reconciliatory approach to the theme.

My conclusion of this section is in line with Susan Fischer’s remarks that “post-colonialism and patriarchy force these migrants into economic relations in which they are exploited. and, in novel, the female body is also a site of colonialization” (116). In Only in London, Al-Shaykh’s protagonists are similarly marginalized. They struggle to cast off poverty
and other restrictions by coming to London to remake their lives. The migrant characters, Amira,
Samir, and Lamis have exchanged what they can for greater economic potential and for the
possibility of freeing themselves from what they perceive to be an oppressive culture. Yet
despite their exploitation and their separateness from the city, these characters have some leeway
to recreate themselves in London's spaces. They take varying degrees of control over their
sexuality. Indeed, in London, Amira, Lamis, and particularly Samir find ways, which would not
be available to them at "home," of constituting hybrid identities, which resist societal norms.
Samir lives a gay life, and, in this arena, London represents freedom. Amira's resistance through
masquerade turns the stereotypes of Middle Eastern women into a tool to obtain what she wants:
economic power. Lamis's story holds out hope as she recognizes herself as a Middle Eastern
woman with a place in London. For Al-Shaykh's characters, London offers—at least on an
individual level—the potential for the "destabilisation of imperial arrangements" (Jacobs 4). As
these characters stake out sites of resistance against exclusion, they recreate a sense of belonging
and a complex new identity in the global city. Each character has experienced difficulties: Amira
has been found out and beaten by a "real" prince, and she has lost her friend, Nahed, to cancer.
Samir's wife and children have arrived from Dubai, and his monkey has run off. Lamis and
Nicholas have severed ties. Yet there is, at the end of the novel, the sense that these characters
have begun to reinvent themselves in ways that are possible "only in London."
“Genetics” means we [Arabs and Westerners] have the same little bowties in our blood.

(Naomi Shihab Nye’s *Habibi* 79)

I would hope that writing... might serve an invitation to get to know some of those other slightly different folks out there in the world-without fear, without thinking of 'otherness' as a threat.

(Nye and Castro, “Nye's Multicultural Literature” 227)

Literature is a bridge that connects people, arching over the gulf that separates the ‘other’ whom the ‘I’ imagines as totally unlike itself. Literature does this by creating empathy and respect among people divided by ideologies and/or alienated by totalizing socio-cultural phenomena like globalization. Naomi Shihab Nye is an Arab-American author and anthologist. Being the daughter of a Palestinian father and American mother, she writes from a unique perspective, as the American newcomer/observer and as the displaced Palestinian in occupied territory. She focuses on the connections that exist in society in her writing, attempting to present the ‘other’ as the familiar to the ‘self’, particularly in this age of globalization. She believes that there are people in this world who believe, truly believe, in such connections. All the tragically bad human behaviours of recent years cannot sway us from our conviction that the majority of beings on the
planet want, and need, to live peacefully together. She hopes to participate in books of a connecting spirit and writes:

If the books I have written or edited inspire a sense of ‘larger family’ among readers, I will be happy. Last year, when a little girl in Alberta, Canada, told me she would "never again read the news [the one representing Arabs as terrorists] in the same way since reading Habibi," I felt I had received the most important review of my life-time. And when Habibi, the story of an Arab American girl and her Jewish friend, was translated recently into Hebrew and published in an Israeli edition, my best wish for that book was fulfilled. ("From One" 39)

Naomi Shihab Nye wrote Habibi in English in 1997. The novel is the story of Liyana, an Arab-American girl who along with her brother have been raised in the United States. Like Naomi Nye, Liyana is the daughter of Palestinian father and American mother. When she is fourteen years old, she receives her first kiss, but her father who is an Arab decides to move the family to Palestine “what do you think about moving to Jerusalem and starting new lives?” her father asks (Habibi 1). He wants his children Liyana and her brother Rafik “to know both sides of their history and become the fully rounded human beings they were destined to be” (3). Liyana is unhappy about the move and leaving her friends and all that she is familiar with. The author compares Liyana's case to that of the well-known Arab poet Mahmoud Darwish in his poem “Homing Pigeons.”

Where do you take me, my love, away from my parents
From my trees, from my little bed, and from my bedroom,
From my mirrors, from my moon, from the closest of my life... from my shyness?

(qtd. in Habibi II)

Arriving in Jerusalem, the girl meets her relatives and comes to experience a new culture where boy/girl relationship is a taboo and women wearing “shorts [is not] appropriate... Arab women do not wear shorts,” Poppy [Liyana’s father] says to Liyana (19). Expressing her feeling, she states “I am nobody... I am even more nobody now than I was then” (14). However, after sometime when they come to know the people and a little about the language, they feel at home “do you like it here? Asked Liyana, and... he [Rafik] answered “Yes”. He hoped they would stay here forever” (99). In Palestine, Liyana comes to know her Sitti, her father’s mother. Though old and illiterate, Sitti believes in peace. It is through her character that Nye represents the real, innocent, and peace-seeking Arab character. Throughout the book, Liyana begins to discover the love of her extended family and the horrors of the war torn country. Though Liyana’s love/relation with the Jewish boy, Omer, marks the challenge vis-a-vis her own people, family, traditions, and culture, it decreases her homesickness. Through this relationship and other events throughout the book she questions the reasons for the hatred between the two groups (Arabs and Jews). Some other issues are also addressed in the book: the violence that marks the Jews-Palestinians conflicts, the relation between the colonizers and the colonized to name just a couple of these issues. In the text, the Israeli soldiers destroy Sitti’s bathroom, they wound Khalid, and Liyana father is sent to jail. On the other side, the colonized Palestinians blast a bomb in a Jewish marketplace. From kisses to politics, “Habibi gives the reader all the sweet richness of a Mediterranean desert, while leaving some of the historic complexities open to interpretation” (Leggett 50).
As a poet, Nye's grasp of language is a beautiful thing, capturing the rich textures of character and place. It is not a fast-paced story, but Nye creates tension that creeps about as Liyana explores the streets practicing her Arabic. The seriousness of what is happening around Liyana is balanced with a sweetness that reflects the author's own childlike curiosity, which however, is not naive. There is violence that brings the conflict home, but Nye leaves a path of hope and friendship. She believes that language can "fortify and rejuvenate the spirit... [It] can transport people 'across the gap,' beyond tribal borders" (Hirschfield 74).

Nye's *Habibi* introduces the readers to a different culture from that of the United States. The novelist aims at removing any doubts about the relation between Arabs and Jews. Though Liyana is faced with the challenge of experiencing and adapting to a new culture, her courage, resolution, and family support make it somewhat easy to overcome the obstacles of reshaping her new identity and experiencing a new way of life, and quickly she acclimatizes and becomes adapted to Palestinian culture. She experiences her first love, understands the true meaning of family, and the inevitable cruelty and horrible repercussions of war. The book borders on the poetic, its portrayal of a grim reality interspersed with humour is profound in its compelling personal search for peace. and engaging in the way it elevates the protagonist's experience into a universal, the experience of most, if not all Palestinians with a hybrid identity.

It is truism that the conflict between the Arab/Muslim world and the West, partly, stems from the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. This conflict is the result of religious clash (Islam and Judaism). Ironically no two religions have more in common than Judaism and Islam. Yet no two religions are so far apart as these are today. The paradoxes underlying the complicated relationship between Jews and Muslims result from their shared history. Despite the similarities, the valiant efforts of Jews and Muslims to create harmony between their faiths are challenged at
every turn by each group’s fear and distrust of the other. Like Nye, Akbar Ahmed in his book *Journey into America*, sees that “few things are as urgent as building bridges between Jews and Muslims, and the United States is perhaps the best country in the world for this to happen” (358). Hence, in the following section, I shall discuss the role of the Americans in the Palestinian-Israeli peace process, but before that I would like to dwell upon the conflict itself and the desire of both sides for peace.

In this age of globalization and due to the American foreign policy, a sense of hatred has developed between the East and the West. 11/9 and its sequences have caused the death of many innocent people in different parts of the world due to the lack of communication and dialogue between the two sides. Nye’s *Habibi* is an attempt to make use of what is called cultural globalization and to build a bridge between the Arab and Western cultures. It is a call for dialogue and communication between the different cultures and nations. The book stresses the significance of word and dialogue to narrow the gap between the different cultures. The novelist explores “the boundaries and intricacies of language and place as the tethers that ultimately connect us all. Her work is unique in its ability to capture the human spirit and appeal to an audience of all ages” (Long 31).

The first major issue to be discussed here is the Arab-Israeli conflict and the desire of both sides to live in peace. Nye’s *Habibi* mainly addresses the Palestinian-Israeli question, which embraces the larger issues of Arab-Israeli conflict. The title marks the beginning of Nye’s attempt to narrow the wide gap between the Jewish and Palestinians. The book title is meaningful and carries connotations. It emphasizes the significance of love and all the lofty emotions between the different groups/ nations/ cultures. ‘Habib’ in Arabic means someone whom we love and respect. The term ‘habibi’ meaning “a dearly loved person, a favourite, a
"charmer" encompasses all aspects of the novel and converges all themes in conclusion (Habibi 213). Nye goes on in her attempt to plant the seeds of the potentiality of peace between the Arabs and the Jews and dedicates the book under scrutiny to her “Armenian friends in the Old City of Jerusalem, and for all Arabs and Jews who would rather be cousins than enemies.” Further, she gives some questions with which she whets one’s intellectual appetite and rouses one’s moral self. She cites Andee Hochman’s questions: “Is a Jew a Palestinian? Is a Palestinian a Jew? (ii). Then throughout the whole text, she tries to answer these questions. She believes in the possibility of peace. “I will say this: we are cut from the same rock, breathe the scent of the same lemons and olives, anchor our troubles with the same stone, carefully placed. We are challah and hummus, eaten together or make a meal (ii).

However, Habibi does not ignore the conflict and violence Palestinian and the Israeli governments promote: “everybody said Jerusalem and Palestine is theirs” (29). For a simple man, it seems impossible to live in peace as they were in the past, “my [Liyana’s] father did not think Arabs and Jews could ever get together again” (255). However, Nye’s constructions of everyday life in Jerusalem and its surroundings illustrates that Palestinian and Israeli identities are more complex than the stereotypes of violence and enmity popularized by the media: “Do you think the Arabs and Jews secretly love one another? Liyana asked. “I think,” Poppy said, “they are bonded for life. Whether they like it or not. Like that kind of glue that won’t let go” (73). The text suggests the complexity of cultural identities that cannot be easily categorized or attributed to all the people of a certain community or background. It also suggests that communication with the other usually results in a positive relationship. The friendship between Omer and Liyana contends that not all Jews/Muslims hold a negative view of the other. Both
Omer and Liyana befriends each other and learn a lot about each other’s culture, tradition, customs, and language.

Nye’s basic purpose in writing the entire novel appears to be that of cementing the gap between the two different, ‘hostile’ cultures. The first step to achieve this goal is both sides’ willingness to communicate with each other. Both of them should truly desire peace. Nye also intends to offer a corrective image of the Arab daily life different from the dehumanizing image that is presented in the Western media. The Arabs are not all suicide bombers and many would appreciate peace as much as any Israeli would. Alex Chapman in his review of the book writes: “Before I read this book, I was totally for all Israelis and wouldn’t even consider any of the Palestinians to be innocent. But after reading this book, I understood the life of Arabs, and consider them when I read all of the news going on in the Middle East.” That Nye has achieved her goal of presenting a good image of the Arabs is also evident from an interesting reader-response: an email (addressed to the author) from a 12 year-old girl who had never been to the Middle East. The girls claimed that she had read *Habibi* once, fell in love with it, and decided to read it again. “I will never think about the Middle East in the same way [the way the Arabs are represented in Western media] again. It has become a real and human place to me. I care about it now” (qtd. in Elmusa 113).

The Arabs’ desire for peace is reflected from the very beginning of the book. In a flashback, Poppy remembers his friend, Mustafa when they were at the airport. They were pulled aside by the Israeli officer, but Mustafa leaned over, kissed the officer on the checks, and said: “let’s just be friends, okay?” (*Habibi* 35). Again when Liyana was enrolled in Armenian school, the priest said that she would be the only ‘outsider’ in the school. A term that made her father flinch. He spoke heartily, “let’s believe together in a world where no one is inside or outside.
Another instance supporting this notion is when Khaled is injured by the colonizer Israeli soldier. When he is asked whether his family would fight back, he replies haltingly “My family—does not like to fight. My parents are very—sad till now... for myself I never fight” (207). All these and many other instances show the Arabs’ desire to lead a peaceful life. Like Liyana, all Arabs “wanted to live in an unlocked world” (75). They are “waiting for a true, independent Palestine, too” (90). More effective reference of the Arab desire for peace is represented when Poppy comes to know about Liyana’s love affair with the Jewish boy, Omer and shows no positive reaction. Liyana represents the Arab position/attitude when she declares: “we want to write a new story” (240). And to further convince him, her American mother supports her idea saying: “she [Liyana] is right. You know. What good is a belief in peace if it does not change the ways we live?” (240). Indeed, the author’s wish to present a positive image of Palestinians or Palestinian-Americans through the simple story of good, helpful, and lovely characters in Habibi, is definitely part of her artistic design to create a sense of an all-encompassing humanity.

The idea of peace between the Arabs and Israelis is not impossible. They had lived in peace in Palestine, the same place for which they are fighting now. Nye epitomizes this notion through the idea of food. For Nye, food, an important part of culture, synecdochically represents culture and the exchange of food and partaking of the culinary productions of other cultures conjures up the vision of a truly multicultural society where difference is respected and appreciated. In the text, Liyana says:

My father would make his square of Arabic hareesa, a delicious cream-of-wheat cake with an almond balanced in the centre, outside on a plate. His Jewish friend Avi from next door brought slices of date rolls. And a Greek girl named Anna
would bring a plate of honey puffs or butter cookies. Everybody liked everyone else's dessert butter than their own. So they'd trade back and forth. Sometimes they traded two ways at once. Everybody was mixed together. My father says nobody talked or thought much about being Arabs or Jews or anything. (*Habibi* 28)

Nye wrote this book to anyone interested in the Arab-Israeli conflict, to those who don't know the side of any Arab. Throughout the book there is no bias towards the Israelis or the Arabs because Nye believes that people should go beyond and surpass their differences. However, she does not ignore the suffering of both sides. Through the words of her protagonist Liyana, Nye shows that the Palestinians are treated as second-class human beings, denied of normal human rights. Liyana says to Omer:

> This fighting is senseless, don’t you think? People should be able to get over their differences by this time, but they just stay mad. They have their old reasons or they find new ones. I mean, I understand it mostly from the Arab side because my father’s family lost their house and their money in the bank... the Palestinians were suffering so much... as if they were second-class human beings you know they could not even show their own flag or have hardly any human rights like the Jews did. (165-166)

Nye is not biased against the Israelis and she presents their sufferings too, but she is of the view that their sufferings could be used in a good way to make them more aware of the Palestinians' sufferings. "I [Liyana] know the Jewish people suffered so much themselves, but do not you [Omer] think it should have made them more sensitive to the sufferings of the others, too" (166). Omer, the representative of the Israeli side, also agrees that the history of fighting is "bad history
without doubt... Nothing to be proud of" (166). Omer and Liyana’s mutual understanding establishes a good ground for deep and fruitful discussion. They agree to “get together” and search for the right solution for the problem of conflict and violence (165). Both of them “have hope for peace” (167).

_Habibi_ suggests that peace is possible when Arabs and Jews appreciate and understand each other at the individual level beyond the boundaries of religious fanaticism. The novel’s response to the tragedies created by the Arab-Israeli-Palestinian conflict suggests that people prefer to live in peace instead of violence. Only through dialogue will Muslims, Arabs, Americans, and Jews be able successfully to resolve issues. Here I may say that Nye is inspired by the Arab thinker, Dr. Salma Jayyusi. In her article “To Any Would-be Terrorists,” Nye cites Jayyusi as saying: “If we read one another, we won’t kill one another.” Violent actions perpetuate misunderstanding among people. Liyana, the protagonist, emphasizes the importance of words and encourages her audience to learn languages of people from other cultures. She herself learns Arabic and Hebrew. Like Lamis, the protagonist in _Only in London_, who learns English, Liyana learns Arabic and Hebrew. Both novelists (Al-Shaykh and Nye) suggest that using words with care will aid the cause of peace. Communication between people is one way of using the power of words to cross the walls of religion, race, and gender and to achieve peace. In this regard, Nye shares Hanan Al-Shaykh’s idea that peace is only possible if “there is a willingness for dialogue, whatever the religion, whatever the nationality” (_London_ 79). Nye suggests ‘dialogue’ to resolve the conflict in the Middle East rather than military force or bomb attacks which are futile and bring more violence. In fact, achieving peace in the Middle East is the first step towards achieving peace on a global scale. Cultural openness and dialogue as solution to conflicts has
been in circulation for so long that it has become something of a dogma. In so far as culture is concerned, no one can easily escape the shaping influence of culture.

As a creative writer who seeks to understand a complex issue like cultural relation in its totality, Nye does more than merely articulate the clichéd statements about cultural conflicts. Nye posits the human body as the most reliable means of achieving openness to cultures. More than words, and other symbols, sensuality promotes an instant recognition of the ‘other’. Nye shares this view with Hanan Al-Shaykh. In *Only in London*, Lamis’s life is uneventful, before meeting Nicholas. Similarly, in *Habibi*, Liyana is not happy in her new home and culture till she meets Omer. When their relationships with their lovers [Nicolas and Omer] begin, Lamis and Liyana’s lives change drastically and they are faced with many new challenges. The sensual acts become Lamis and Liyana’s means of exploring their wish to cement the gap between the two different cultures.

He [Omer] touched her [Liyana’s] elbow gently, leaned forward and placed his beautiful mouth on hers.

A kiss. Wild river. Sudden over stones. As startlingly as the first time, but nicer, since it happened in the light.

And bigger than the whole deep ache of blue.

It didn’t go away right away.

It held, as Omer gently held her elbow cupped in his hand. Warmth spilled between them.

“Liyana,” he said. “I—like you.”

“Oh!” She said, “Me too. I like you.” (196)
Love making is used as a signifier for the crossing of borders. The two protagonists’ love affair with the Western other becomes the epitome of the undiscovered cultural landscape. Through the story of Liyana and her love affair with the Israeli Omer, the novelist addresses the theme of border-crossing in general and the Palestinian-Israeli’s relation in particular.

Like Al-Shaykh, Nye represents the East as the feminized temptress. The East in both novels is represented by women who seek freedom and peace with help of the English/Israeli man. Namely for both novelists, the East is represented as a woman and the West as a man. Both writers do not see in the relationship between the West and the Arab world as a colonial confrontation that is based on hostility and dominance. On the contrary, it is a relationship that stems from a feminine consciousness that endorses the need for cross-cultural conversation.

In rewriting the East-West encounter, both Al-Shaykh and Nye attempt to create a new transnational culture; a means of seeing a new reality that has the ability to cross cultural boundaries and overcome differences. Thus, through the pairing of Arab women (Lamis/Liyana) ‘self’ and English/Israeli man (Nicolas/Omer) ‘other,’ Al-Shaykh and Nye match the Eastern Lamis/Liyana with the Western counterpart, Nicholas/Omer. Through this, both novelists attempt to convey a —reconciliatory view of the other. Frankly said, Nye admirably “keeps a humane balance between affinities personal or otherwise. Even when she handles the thorny political theme of the struggle between the Israelis and Palestinians, she does so with much gentleness” (Maleh 26).

A similarity that all the three novels discussed in this chapter share is that all the three writers use airports and aeroplanes as metaphors for the shrinking of space and time. Like Rajaa Al-Sanea and Hanan Al-Shaykh, Nye uses airports as cosmopolitan intermixed spaces open to
cultural encounters and crossroads in people’s life journeys. In the three novels, aeroplanes and airports are Homi Bhabha’s in-between spaces where identity temporarily loses its appearances as essence. When Liyana and her family are on the aeroplane, moving from Kennedy Airport to Tel Aviv Airport, Liyana writes in her note book “a new chapter begins in the dark” (*Habibi* 27). This statement marks the goal of the novelist which is the beginning of a new relation between the Palestinians and the Jews. Hence, airports represent spaces for easy communication, where people’s fates can be intermingled. Nye uses the airport as a metaphor that carries an important implication at the beginning of the novel. Likewise, the aeroplane serves as the perfect metaphor for the shrinking of distances. It symbolizes globalization and modern age, reconnecting the characters’ past with their present, and narrowing the vast spaces not only between cultures, but also between human beings.

_Nye’s *Habibi* is an attempt to answer the Arab-Israeli question: can the colonized Palestinians cross the line and be friend/s with the Israeli colonizers? What role does the American administration play in regard to the Palestinian-Israeli peace/conflict? Some scholars believe that *Habibi* is the plan that the recent American president flows in his policy regarding the Palestinians- Israeli conflict. Mansoor Mohammed Al-Gabali argues that a close reading of Nye’s *Habibi* shows that “Nye and Obama share similar ideas and hopes about the peace between Arabs and Israelis” (215). He states that president Obama is focusing on Palestinian-Israeli negotiations. His administration is hoping that the hawkish Israeli leader Benjamin Netanyahu will publicly endorse Palestinian statehood for the first time on the basis of the United States policy that supports the two-state solution with Israeli and Palestinian co-existing peacefully as neighbouring States.
In the narrative, Americans, Arabs, and Jews are the main characters and the novel revolves around their discussion about the importance of moving the process of peace a step forward. Liyana’s American mother, Liyana, and her father, the Arab Americans, Omer, a Jews, Sitti, the Palestinian Muslim grandmother, all form a family. Both Israelis and Arabs desire peace. Omer, the representative of the Israelis loves Liyana and all her family members for the kindness and well-mannered treatment they deal with him. Liyana’s family “… felt like a family to him. He wished they did not have all these troubles in their shared country” (Habibi 258). The Palestinians share the same feeling of comfort and friendship. This is reflected in Sitti’s response to Omer saying: “we have been waiting for you a very long time” (258). Further, Sitti inspirits Liyana to go on to achieve peace and Liyana (as representative of the American missionaries to the Middle East) promises to do that “I will try” (271). Nye’s Habibi introduces us examples of struggles towards achieving peace, all the troubles and conflicts do not stop Liyana, her family, Omer, and other people of different religions and ethnic backgrounds from working towards peace. Instead of being frustrated, the narrator asserts:

Liyana’s whole family seemed to be joining things. Poppy had joined a human­-rights group to focus on treatment and services for old people. Rafik joined an ecology club at his school—they would work with garbage and recycling. Their mother belonged to a women’s Communications Club—women of different backgrounds writing letters to editors and sharing optimistic ideas. She would probably be elected president soon. After their first meeting the Jerusalem Post wrote an editorial saying if other people followed their example, the peace process might zoom ahead. (215)
To some like Al-Gabali, both Obama and Nye seem to share optimism about the possibility of bringing peace to the region supporting talks and dialogues among people. Obama’s policy is to support peace process on the basis of some treaties such as “the Road Map,” a policy which is emphasized in Habibi’s chapter entitled the “Map”. ‘Map’ opens with Liyana lightening a candle and wishing for a map that says: “Here is the country of littleness…Here are roads leading every direction” (265). Matt Spetalnick and Jeffrey Heller in their article “Obama Presses 2-State Solution” have cited Obama as saying: “both Israel and Palestinians would have to meet obligations under the 2003 Middle East ‘roadmap,’ which calls on Israel on halt settlement expansion in the occupied West Bank and for the Palestinians to rein in militants.” What Obama said shows the clear vision of Nye and her devotion to the peace process in the region. Relating the political situation and the policy of America in achieving peace in the region makes us feel as if Nye’s Habibi were “the theory that Obama follows in his policy towards the Arab-Israeli issue” (Al-Gabali 218).

Roula Khalaf in her article “Obama Opens Doors for Hope,” argues that the novel is a real reflection of the day-to-day life, one that interprets the trends and tendencies of contemporary society and advocates an appropriate course of action. Nye emerges as a prophet of peace after a decade of the publication of Habibi. In the text, Sitti tells Omer that he has to play his part in bringing peace and it will be difficult to break the walls, but he can find “Doors” (Habibi 268). Nye triumphantly announces that “there was a door in the heart that had no lock on it” (268). Khalaf and Al-Gabali share the same view that the two-state solution—an independent Palestine living in peace next to a secure Israel, that the US is actively considering is anticipated by Habibi.
Nye's work, however, has received its share of criticism. Jamal Nassar in his book *Globalization and Terrorism* presents a completely different argument. He states that the American administration is supporting the Israelis tactics. The American mass media has done an excellent job of burying and censoring Israeli terrorism, thereby erasing American responsibility for Israel's actions. American aid to Israel goes, among other things, to the purchase of American military weapons which are used repeatedly in Israeli human rights abuses committed against Palestinians in the occupied territories. American aid is used to protect thousands of Israeli settlers living illegally in Jerusalem and the West Bank. Nassar adds that it would be difficult if not impossible for the Obama administration (or past administrations) to argue that they are not aware of Israeli human rights violations. This would mean that the American leaders have continued their support to Israel despite its crimes. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that the Israeli assault serves as a reminder of American geopolitical interest, and of the existence of the invisible American empire.

Unlike Mansoor Al-Gabali, Roula Khalaf, and many others who believe that the novel outlines the theory that Obama follows in his policy towards the Arab-Israeli conflict, I believe that the Americans are not neutral. They bolster the Israeli side against the weaponless Palestinians. President Barack Obama has spared no efforts to strengthen the American-Israeli relations. Greg Scoblete in his article "U. S. alliance to Israel" has cited President Obama's speech during his visit to Israel on 20 March 2013.

The United States of America stands with the State of Israel because it is in our fundamental national security interest to stand with Israel. It makes us both stronger. It makes us both more prosperous. And it makes the world a better place. That's why the United States was the very first nation to recognize the
State of Israel 65 years ago. That’s why the Star of David and the Stars and Stripes fly together today. And that is why I’m confident in declaring that our alliance is eternal, it is forever.

I do not believe that Nye is simpleminded and is not aware of the American administration’s standpoint of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. I think that a novel like Habibi reflects the compulsion an immigrant like Nye is under. Being immigrant in the States, her surroundings do not permit her to launch a direct attack on the American foreign policy. But her plea for peace is born out of her awareness that the rhetoric of blame cannot help further the cause. In the novel, Nye manages to make the wish for peaceful life with the Israeli ‘other’ personal and concrete. Her dream is making the inner peace that Liyana’s grandmother Sitti experiences: “I never lost my peace inside,” available to all Palestinians and Israelis (Habibi 247).

Furthermore, Nye is critical about extremist groups coming to power and creating more conflicts and victimizing people of both sides, the Palestinians and Jews. In a letter addressed “To Any Would-Be Terrorists,” Nye requests them (terrorists) to stop such violent action because they: “kill thousands of innocent, international people... and scar their families forever, they wounded a huge community of people in the Middle East, in the United States and all over the world.” she also writes:

Please know the mission was a terrible success, and you can stop now...I beg you, as your distant Arab cousin, as your American neighbor, listen to me. Our hearts are broken, as yours may also feel broken in some ways we can’t understand, unless you tell us in words. Killing people won’t tell us. We can’t read that message. Find another way to live. Don’t expect others to be like you.
Similarly, in the novel, Liyana reminds the extremists that peace can never be achieved through religious fanaticism. She writes: “why would any God want to be only large enough to fit inside a certain group of hearts?” (Habibi 182).

Nye’s *Habibi* invites readers to see themselves in a global context where differences are celebrated, tempered by the recognition that all are equal. The text shows how intercultural relationships and respect can develop through communication and openness to differences. In all her writings, Nye appreciates differences and challenges the rigid boundaries of identification. Andrea Shalal-Esa argues that “Nye’s writing reflects her appreciation of differences, as well as the small, the local, and the personal aspects of daily life.” In “The Poetry Foundation,” Nye is cited as saying: “I have always loved the gaps, the spaces between things, as much as the things. I love staring, pondering, mulling, puttering. I love the times when someone or something is late—there’s that rich possibility of noticing more, in the meantime... calls us to pause. There is so much we overlook, while the abundance around us continues to shimmer, on its own.” Nye suggests that any solution for the Arab and Western conflict should start by rectifying the images of the Americans in the Arab and Muslim world and vice versa. Both sides should desire peace and work to achieve it. In the text under scrutiny, Nye’s hope for peace goes beyond the Arab-Israeli conflict. It is hope for global peace, peace born out of the respect for differences. The novelist aims to make many voices available in order “connect us all as human beings” and to help readers see the relationships across cultures (Nye and Castro 233). I do agree with Al-Gabali that *Habibi* is a poignant and powerful call for peace, if not one of the most effective literary works that put the seeds of a practical dialogue between America and the rest of the world, which can lead to narrowing the gaps between people across cultures on the basis of communication, understanding, and acceptance. Naomi Shihab Nye’s writing “strives to ‘blur
borders, whether of culture, genre, or form” (Vardell 23). Nye’s ability to evoke such reception is directly related to the Arab-American ethos.

Literature is a product of the thought and interactions of different social, political, economic, and religious institutions. As the society changes, literature also changes in the way of expressing its themes, techniques, and the mode of awareness. Ever since the time, Arab world opted to go global, sweeping socio-economical, political, and technological changes. As for the Arabs, globalization has become the buzzword after 1990, and day-by-day this buzzing is getting louder. It has touched all the domains of Arab life and experience. Globalization is no longer a theoretical concept; it is a glaring reality, impinging upon almost every aspect of human existence. The fast growing cities and the overall urbanization that we have been witnessing across the Arab world are the direct effect of globalization. The day-to-day experience, demands of the time, challenges posed by it, personal hopes, aspirations, and dreams in Arab cities have almost metamorphosed. Globalization has changed the blood and soul of all these things. Many Arab writers as Rajaa Al-Sanea, Hanan Al-Shaykh, and Naomi Nye make use of the opportunities created by globalization to create channels of communication between the East and the West. For them, this age is the time of border shrinking. In the literary texts analyzed in this chapter, the writers draw attention to the intertwining of experiences and similarities of issues in a globalized society. They invite the reader to intercultural relations where differences are celebrated. All of them have attempted to present the outlines of a transnational culture: where all the boundaries of race, gender, class, nation, or religion melt and fuse.