



INTERTEXTUALITY AS A LITERARY DEVICE TO DE-ORIENTALISE THE SELF IN LAILA LALAMI'S THE OTHER AMERICANS AND RABIH ALAMEDDINE'S AN UNNECESSARY WOMAN

Hussein Nasir Shwein 

Department of English/ College of Arts / University of
Al-Qadisiyya / Al-Qadisiyya - Iraq

Article Information

Article History:

Received May 10th, 2025

Revised Jun 14th, 2025

Accepted Jun 29th, 2025

Available Online June 1st, 2026

Keywords:

Arab American Literature,
Cultural Resistance,
De-Orientalization,
Intertextuality,
Orientalism.

Correspondence:

Hussein Nasir Shwein

hussein.naser@qu.edu.iq

Abstract

The current article explores the literary device of intertextuality in de-orientalizing the self in two contemporary Arab American novels: Laila Lalami's *The Other Americans* (2019) and Rabih Alameddine's *An Unnecessary Woman* (2013). According to Edward Said, Orientalism has for generations been a determinant factor in shaping the Western view of Arab identities, often reducing it down to simplistic, exotic stereotyping. The present study examines how intertextual referencing within these novels deconstructs Orientalist narratives to represent a multifaceted picture of Arab American identities. While the textual elements of intertextuality can be scrutinized for allusions to classical Arab literature, Western texts, and contemporary cultural materials, seeking to illuminate how these works challenge cultural stereotyping and strive for authentic self-representation. By addressing this research gap, previous studies on the role of intertextuality in de-orientalizing Arab American identities bridge the gap. The findings pointed toward how the literary technique called intertextuality had reshaped narratives and added richness to the portrayal of complex identities. In this manner, it will add to the general knowledge of ways through which minority literature can use literary devices to fight back against hegemonic cultural discourses and create a distinctive voice.

DOI: : 10.33899/radab.v56i105.63463 ©Authors, 2023, College of Arts, University of Mosul.

This is an open access article under the CC BY 4.0 license <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

التناص كأداة أدبية لإزالة الطابع الاستشراقي عن الذات في رواية "الأمريكيون الآخرون" لليلى العلمي
و"امرأة غير ضرورية" لربيع علم الدين

حسين ناصر شوين*

المستخلص:

* قسم اللغة الإنكليزية / كلية الآداب / جامعة القادسية / القادسية – العراق

تتناول هذه المقالة توظيف تقنية التناص الأدبي في عملية إزالة الطابع الاستشراقي عن الذات في روايتين معاصرتين من الأدب العربي الأمريكي، وهما الأمريكيون الآخرون (2019) للكاتبة ليلي العلمي وامرأة غير ضرورية (2013) للكاتب ربيع علم الدين. وبحسب إدوارد سعيد، فإن الاستشراق كان لعدة أجيال عاملاً حاسماً في تشكيل النظرة الغربية للهويات العربية، وغالباً ما اختزلها في صور نمطية مبسطة وغريبة. تبحث هذه الدراسة في كيفية تفكيك السرديات الاستشراقية من خلال الإشارات التناصية في هاتين الروايتين، لتمثيل صورة متعددة الأبعاد للهويات العربية الأمريكية. يتم تحليل عناصر التناص من حيث الإحالات إلى الأدب العربي الكلاسيكي، والنصوص الغربية، والمواد الثقافية المعاصرة، في محاولة لتسليط الضوء على كيفية تحدي هذه الأعمال للأحكام الثقافية النمطية، وسعيها نحو تمثيل ذاتي أصيل. ومن خلال معالجة هذا الفراغ البحثي، تساهم الدراسة في سدّ النقص في الأدبيات السابقة المتعلقة بدور التناص في إزالة الطابع الاستشراقي عن الهويات العربية الأمريكية. وقد أشارت النتائج إلى أن تقنية التناص قد أعادت تشكيل السرديات الأدبية، وأضفت عمقاً وغنىً على تصوير الهويات المعقدة. وبهذا الشكل، تساهم الدراسة في إثراء المعرفة حول الطرق التي يمكن للأدب الصادر عن الأقليات أن يوظف بها الأدوات الأدبية لمواجهة الخطابات الثقافية المهيمنة وخلق صوت مميز وخاص به.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الأدب العربي الأمريكي ، المقاومة الثقافية ، إزالة الطابع الاستشراقي ، التناص ، الاستشراق.

Introduction:

Today, Arab American literature occupies a distinct space within American letters and has produced various images of Arab American identity, many contradictory. These stories constantly negotiate with the shadow of *Orientalism*, a theory famously put forth by Edward Said in his book *Orientalism* (1978), critiquing the condescending views that the West takes on representations of "the East" as exotic, backward, and uncivilized. Specifically, this study focuses on how contemporary Arab American novelists have used intertextuality to de-orientalize the self and the representation of identity by challenging and deconstructing Orientalist narratives.

Furthermore, Julia Kristeva introduced intertextuality, the process by which one text derives meaning from another. It deals with how various texts implicate and refer to each other, creating different strata of meaning and dialogue between the old and the new (Bakhtin, 1981; Kristeva, 1980). Intertextuality, a powerful tool in contemporary Arab American writing, subverts and resists the simplistic binaries imposed by Orientalist discourse. In addition, Narratives that represent the multifaceted experiences of Arab Americans can be developed via a multilayered method that fuses the classic Arabic literature, the Western literary canon, and the current cultural texts, hence participating in dialogic intertextuality that brings out the overlapping identities and the contested representations as well (Said, 1978).

This paper analyses the intertextuality of Laila Lalami's *The Other Americans* (2019) and Rabih Alameddine's *An Unnecessary Woman* (2013). Both use intertextual references to significant effect, as this can enrich a story and resist and redefine perceptions created through *Orientalism* (Said, 1978). In *The Other Americans* (Lalami, 2019), Lalami entangled classic Arabic poetry and contemporary American culture so famously to create a narrative of identity, belonging, and questions of justice. Alameddine's *An Unnecessary Woman* (2013) uses a dense tapestry of references from Marcel Proust to classical Arabo-Muslim poets to depict loneliness, creativity, and searching for meaning.

Other studies have emphasized the aesthetic value of this strategy or its narrative role in intertextual practice, but they have neglected its de-orienting function. Therefore, the paper is designed to fill this gap, explicating how intertextuality challenges Orientalist stereotypes and, more importantly, asserts a more authentic, complex identity for Arab Americans. Through close readings of the chosen texts, the article argues that the intertextual references constitute a form of cultural resistance, reshaping narratives and enriching portrayals of Arab American identities.

Such works, in addition, serve to add to general knowledge of how minority literatures use literary techniques in their claim against dominant cultural discourses to be able to bring their unique voices. These studies point to intertextuality, among other tactics, as an effort toward self-de-orientalization; they result in new insight into the cyclic interdependence between literature, identity, and cultural politics. In this vein, the present paper contributes to a more general understanding of how minority literature operates to de-orientalize and counter dominant cultural narratives, asserting their unique voices through involvement strategies. That is why it's so important to use a de-orienting strategy based on intertextual mechanisms to understand how literature and identity change over time about cultural politics.

Methodology:

The theoretical basis for this research draws from Edward Said's classic work, *Orientalism* (1978). Said meticulously showed that Orientalism is not a naive academic field of study but a hegemonic Western discourse that portrays the "Orient" (primarily the Middle East and Asia) as fundamentally other, exotic, static, and inferior to the "Occident." Most importantly, this discourse cannot be separated from power; it developed alongside European colonialism and was employed as a justification for Western political, economic, and cultural domination. Said (1978) contends that this representation system creates a knowledge corpus that defines, manages, and effectively controls the Orient, often reducing several peoples and cultures to essentialist stereotypes. Orientalism functions ideologically from a critical perspective in perpetuating Western hegemony by creating an "Other" against which the West constructs its own perceived superiority (Said, 1978).

Moreover, subsequent critique and evolution of Said's work clearly explain the methodology applied in this research. Scholars working in postcolonial and critical forms of theory have expanded upon Said's argument by investigating intersections of *Orientalism* with class, race, and gender (Lowe, 1996; Yegenoglu, 1998). For instance, scholars like Meyda Yegenoglu (1998) examine how gendered tropes become the focal point in Orientalist fantasy, with a tendency to portray Eastern women as hypersexualized or passive victims, thereby reinforcing patriarchal orders within and outside the represented cultures. In her work in 1996 that focused on the issues of the Asian region, Lisa Lowe exposed the heterogeneity hidden within the monolithic category of the "Orient," making an appeal for the massive ignorance contained in the essentializing discourses by pointing out the need to pay attention to the exact material conditions and the historical scene. Thus, this research acknowledges that Orientalist stereotypes are not monolithic but contextually employed, often for specific political or social ends that reinforce existing power structures. In this regard, Steven Salaita's (2011) writing is particularly relevant, as he explores the long-standing impact of Orientalist stereotypes on Arab American identities in contemporary America, showing how literary creation can be a helpful space through which to counter these destructive images and produce other forms of self-narrative. Therefore, reading literature from an Orientalist perspective allows one to think about how texts engage with, imitate, or, most significantly, actively resist these power-laden representational forms for this research.

Complementing the critique of *Orientalism*, this study utilizes the theory of intertextuality, primarily as conceptualized by Julia Kristeva (1980). Building on Bakhtin's dialogism, Kristeva proposed that any text is a "mosaic of quotations," absorbing and transforming other texts. According to Kristeva (1980), meaning is not inherent in a single text but is produced through its intertextual relationships with other literary, cultural, historical, and social texts. Subsequently, critics like Roland Barthes demanded the reader's agency in establishing such intertextual connections, suggesting that a text is a "tissue of signs" drawn from infinite

locations of culture (Barthes, 1977). Here, intertextuality is less a matter of style but a fundamental condition of textual meaning and cultural production.

Additionally, intertextuality provides a powerful critical instrument for seeing how writers from oppressed communities respond to and subvert hegemonic cultural narratives, such as those of *Orientalism*. By intentionally incorporating allusions to other texts, canonical Western texts, classical texts of their tradition, or more recent cultural artifacts, writers can produce a dialogue space within their narratives. As Bakhtin might term it, this dialogic potential allows writers to place dominant discourses alongside alternative perspectives, thereby questioning, parodying, or recontextualising established meanings (Bakhtin, 1981). Specifically, appeal to canonical Western texts can do several things: it can demonstrate critical engagement, challenge the pretensions to the universality of the Western canon, or ironically confront its ideals with realities. References to classical Arab or other non-Western traditions, on the other hand, enable authors also to reappropriate the richness and continued vitality of their cultural past, thereby refuting Orientalist representations of the East as stagnant or intellectually barren. Authors complicate fixed understandings of identity and oppose essentialist readings by placing diverse textual traditions in conversation within the same book.

Therefore, this methodology posits that intertextuality is a strategic device for de-Orientalization. By creating texts rich with multiple allusions and cultural echoes, authors can actively disrupt the simplistic, stereotypical representations fostered by Orientalist discourse. The layering of references mirrors diasporic or postcolonial identities' complex, hybrid nature, refusing easy categorization. In essence, the intertextual nature of the work becomes a performance of cultural and intellectual complexity, demanding a mode of reading that acknowledges multiplicity and resists the binary logic of *Orientalism*.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

The critique of Arab American literature today involves collaboration with critical theories that address identity, representation, and the extended shadow of *Orientalism*. Edward Said's (1978) classic critique is a starting point, describing how Western discourses have historically constructed the "Orient," and by association, the Arab world, as a static, exotic, and occasionally inferior "Other." This representational strategy, argues Said, is bound up with colonial power relations and continues to influence present-day conceptions of Arab and Arab American identity. Consequently, much Arab American literature traverses this terrain somehow, attempting to subvert stereotypes and construct more nuanced, self-directed subjectivities. Building on the efforts of Said, postcolonial critics have also explored how these representational politics overlap with diaspora, hybridity, cultural translation, and resistance (Hassan, 2014; Lowe, 1996).

Moreover, intertextual theory, formulated by Julia Kristeva (1980) and Roland Barthes (1977), offers a prolific avenue for exploration of how literature texts create meaning by communicating with other texts. For Kristeva, all texts are an intake and reinterpretation of different texts, a "mosaic of quotations" (1980, p. 66). This consciousness goes beyond simple source-fishing to answer the live action of texts, in which allusions, echoes, and references sustain multiple layers of meaning and cultural connotation. On this basis, intertextuality is not merely a stylistic trope but an effective tool for authors, particularly those from marginalized groups, to answer, criticize, and even subvert canonical literary and cultural processes (Allen, 2011). By braiding together sources of a diverse assortment of points of view non-canonical and canonical,

Western and non-Western authors can construct tales that convey hybrid selves and disrupt singular cultural explanations.

Specifically examining the critical reception of Rabih Alameddine's *An Unnecessary Woman* (2013), scholars frequently highlight the novel's profound engagement with literature. Critics often focus on the reclusive life of the protagonist, Aaliya Saleh, in Beirut, where her solitary practice of translating canonical Western novels into Arabic becomes her primary means of existence and self-understanding (*Mohammed, 2023; Muecke, 1982*). Much analysis centers on themes of memory, solitude, the trauma of the Lebanese Civil War, and the role of art and literature as both refuge and burden (Letaief and Amrieh, 2022). Aaliya's extensive and explicit citation of authors like Pessoa, Sebald, Rilke, and Calvino is widely noted; however, this rich intertextuality is often discussed primarily in terms of its contribution to characterization portraying Aaliya's erudition and isolation or as a meta-commentary on the nature of reading and translation itself (Madiou, 2021). While implicitly touching upon resistance to stereotypes (the elderly, Arab, unmarried woman as intellectual), existing criticism less frequently foregrounds this dense intertextual web as a deliberate strategy to deconstruct Orientalist representations of Arab subjectivity and intellectual life. The potential for Aaliyah's engagement with both Western and classical Arabic texts (Alameddine, 2013, p. 14) to forge a complex, non-essentialised identity resistant to Orientalist binaries is an area ripe for further exploration.

Similarly, Laila Lalami's *The Other Americans* (2019) has garnered critical attention primarily for its timely exploration of contemporary American social issues, including immigration, Islamophobia, prejudice, and the complexities of belonging in a post-9/11 landscape (Basu, 2021; Mohammed, 2023). Critics often praise Lalami's use of a polyphonic narrative structure, giving voice to a diverse cast of characters—Arab American immigrants, their American-born children, white Americans, and undocumented immigrants—to create a multifaceted portrait of a community grappling with secrets, grief, and social fractures (El Boubekri; 2024; Rivaldy et al., 2019). The novel's blending of a family saga with the conventions of the mystery genre has also been a focus as a way to investigate hidden truths and societal tensions (Edouihri, 2021). However, while discussions acknowledge the novel's nuanced portrayal of Arab American experiences and its critique of American societal prejudices, which inherently counters Orientalist tropes, less critical ink has been explicitly spilled on the specific role of intertextuality as a de-orientalizing technique within the narrative. References to cultural touchstones, whether the implicit weight of Moroccan heritage for Driss or Nora's engagement with American life and education, are present but often analyzed primarily for their contribution to the plot, character development, or social commentary rather than as strategic intertextual moves aimed specifically at dismantling Orientalist frameworks of representation.

Therefore, a distinct gap exists in the critical literature concerning the comparative analysis of intertextuality as a primary de-orientalizing strategy in these specific contemporary Arab American novels. While scholarship addresses *Orientalism* in Arab American writing (Salaita, 2011), explores the narrative and aesthetic functions of intertextuality (Amireh, 2021; Fadda-Conrey, 2014), and provides insightful readings of Alameddine's and Lalami's works, the targeted examination of how their intertextual practices specifically function to resist Orientalist stereotypes and articulate complex, self-determined identities remains underdeveloped. This study aims to bridge this gap by focusing explicitly on how the strategic weaving of diverse textual and cultural references in *An Unnecessary Woman* (Alameddine, 2013) and *The*

Other Americans (Lalami, 2019) serves to de-center Western Gaze, challenge essentialist notions of "Arabness," and construct nuanced portrayals of the self that defy Orientalist confinement.

Textual Analysis

The use of intertextuality as a tactical literary tool in *The Other Americans* (2019) by Laila Lalami and *An Unnecessary Woman* (2013) by Rabih Alameddine is one of the core literary techniques for subverting and deconstructing simplistic stereotypes used in Orientalist discourse. In the wake of Edward Said (1978), *Orientalism* itself has long characterized Arab identities as Westernised projections emphasizing exoticism, backwardness, and a lack of psychological complexity or depth. Lalami and Alameddine push back against these old-blooming stories by weaving thick webs of textual references from canonical Arab tradition, Western cultural tradition, and their contemporary cultural environments to offer richly detailed, authentic Arab and Arab American selves. Alameddine enters a lonely woman's deeply self-aware, bookstuffed interior life in Beirut. Lalami employs a polyphonic narrative rooted in contemporary America to negotiate the complex lives of an immigrant family and their universe. The comparative critical analysis observes how each author's innovative application of intertextuality functions as de-orientalization, enacting narrative authority, intellectual curiosity, and cultural complexity over one-dimensional presentations of Arab identity.

Initially, Rabih Alameddine's *An Unnecessary Woman* (2013) immediately presents a protagonist, Aaliya Saleh, whose identity is profoundly shaped and articulated through literature. Living a secluded life in Beirut, Aaliya dedicates herself to the private, seemingly "unnecessary" act of translating Western novels into Arabic, creating one manuscript per year, which she then stores unpublished in her apartment. Her apartment becomes a repository of these intertextual engagements, a physical manifestation of her inner world built from the words of others. This profound connection to literature, particularly the Western canon, directly challenges the Orientalist stereotype of the passive, intellectually void Arab woman confined to domesticity or tradition (Said, 1978). Aaliya possesses immense intellectual agency, curating her literary world as a form of refuge and self-definition. Her obsessive engagement with texts from various Western traditions demonstrates a mind actively participating in global literary conversations, refusing the intellectual marginalization often imposed by Orientalist frameworks. Early in the novel, Aaliya reflects on her life's work, implicitly linking her identity to her translations:

Over these last fifty years, I've translated fewer than forty books—thirty-seven, if I count correctly. Some books took longer than a year, others refused to be translated, and one or two bored me into submission—not the books themselves, but my translations of them. Books in and of themselves are rarely dull, except for memoirs of American presidents (No, No, Nixon)—well, memoirs of Americans in general. (Alameddine, 2013, p. 10)

This passage demonstrates Aaliya's close reading of literature; she is not a passive reader but an astute reader and translator with definite opinions, notably displaying contempt for tales that she considers self-pitying or too simplistic. Specifically, she is disdainful of memoirs wallowing in personal hardship in a victimhood guise of triumph, such as "I live in the richest country in the world but feel sorry for me because I had flat feet and an odoriferous vagina but I triumph in the end." (Alameddine, 2013, p. 146). This criticism indicates her disdain for formulaic narratives based on appealing for sympathy rather than expressing thoughtful or intellectually stimulating opinions. Her description of literature as her "sandbox" underscores the idea that this intertextual space is where she exercises control and creativity and finds true meaning,

contrasting sharply with the external world that "gives me trouble." This self-constructed intellectual haven de-Orientalises her by positioning her not as an object of cultural curiosity but as a subject with a rich, complex inner life defined by her dialogue with global literature (Althusser, 1971; Said, 1978; Kristeva, 1980). Her solitary translation becomes an assertion of intellectual existence outside the purview or validation of Western or traditional Arab society.

Moreover, the protagonist Aaliya's rejection of formulaic Western memoirs, as indicated by her disdainful exclamation "Tfeh!," is a straightforward demonstration of the willing rejection of Orientalist discourse's reductionism as "It's the "I live in the richest country in the world yet pity me because I grew up with flat feet. A malodorous vagina, but I triumph in the end" syndrome. Tfeh! "(Alameddine, 2013, p. 10). Drawing on Edward Said's critique of *Orientalism*, the episode illustrates how Western cultural products impose reductionist, self-serving narratives over non-Western intellectual subjectivities. Additionally, Aaliya's practice of literary activism and translation is an exercise in intellectual agency and decolonial critique, which appropriates Orientalist representation by engaging and reworking global literary discourse. Aaliyah's figure is thus a de-Orientalization that disrupts hegemonic Western forms and insists on the complexity and autonomy of Arab identities(Allen, 2011)..

Furthermore, Aaliya's "sandbox" metaphor for books, where she "constructs forts and castles," underscores the extent to which reading and translating give her a necessary place to construct and be herself. This literary safe house starkly contrasts the "visible world" against which she rebels, suggesting that her intellectual life is one of resistance and survival. In retreating into this interior space, Aaliya occupies herself, establishing a private space in which she holds meaning-making power and resists outside demands as:

Books into boxes—boxes of paper, loosely translated sheets. That's my life. I long ago abandoned myself to a blind lust for the written word. Literature is my sandbox. In it, I play, build my forts and castles, and spend glorious time. It is the world outside that box that gives me trouble. I have adapted tamely, though not conventionally, to this visible world so I can retreat without much inconvenience into my inner world of books." (Alameddine, 2013, p. 10)

Here, it also resists Orientalist assumptions regarding Arab subjectivity by turning Aaliya into an active, inquiring intellect and not a passive stereotype. Her scrupulous work on "boxes of paper" illustrates the confines set upon her by society and her refusal to be constrained. In translating, Aaliya crosses cultural boundaries, violating Western literary dominance and demanding the diversity of Arab identities, undermining simplistic Orientalist explanations (Said,1978).

Aaliya's intensive engagement with the Western canon calling upon authors like Pessoa, Rilke, Calvino, Sebald, Kafka, Proust, and countless others is an instant means of self-representation that defies Orientalist categorization. She doesn't just read; she lives through these texts, using them as lenses to understand her experiences of solitude, memory, war, and aging in Beirut. Her meticulous, ritualistic translation process is an act of profound intellectual engagement, demonstrating a mastery and deep understanding of complex Western literary traditions often presumed by Orientalist thought to be beyond the grasp or interest of an "Eastern" mind, particularly that of an aging woman (Said, 1978; Mohanty, 1991; Spivak; 1988). Her internal monologue is saturated with literary references, showing how these texts form the very fabric of her consciousness. Consider her reflection on her translation process and its connection to her sense of self

:

How safe I will feel once I begin my translation, how sheltered, seated at this desk in the night, as Sebald as Jacques Austerlitz described, seated at this desk "watching the tip of my pencil in the lamplight following its shadow, as if of its own accord and with perfect fidelity . . . from left to right"—right to left, in my case—"line by line, over the ruled paper." On this oak magnificence, I place the new notepad, next to the pencils, next to the pens. I unscrew the primary pen, an old Parker, and inspect the ink. The walnut-shaped inkwell, a fake antique of porcelain and copper, is lushly full. It is always a delicious thrill when I prepare for a new project. I feel at home in my rituals. (Alameddine, 2013, p. 23-24)

Additionally, Aaliya explicitly aligns herself with figures from the Western texts she translates (Sebald's Austerlitz), adopting their posture and finding safety and shelter within the act of translation. This is not mere imitation but a profound identification, a way of locating herself within a chosen intellectual lineage that transcends geographical and cultural boundaries. Her "rituals" surrounding translation become acts of self-care and world-building, constructing a reality where she is centred and intellectually fulfilled (Althusser, 1971). This detailed focus on her process, tools, and emotional connection to the act ("delicious thrill") paints a portrait of a woman deeply invested in intellectual life, directly countering the Orientalist image of the passive or intellectually unsophisticated Arab woman. Her knowledge is vast, her engagement critical, and her self-worth intrinsically tied to this intertextual activity. She de-orientalizes herself by demonstrating intellectual autonomy and depth defined by her engagement with these texts rather than being defined against them or solely by her Arab context (Kristeva, 1980).

However, Aaliya's intertextual world is not solely built on the Western canon. Alameddine complicates her character and further resists Orientalist simplification by showing her equally passionate, albeit differently expressed, connection to classical Arabic literature (Kristeva, 1980). This double engagement is significant to de-Orientalization because it does not enable her to be stereotyped as merely "Westernised" – another Orientalist cartography that prevents the possibility of a rich hybrid existence (Said, 1978; Spivak, 1988). Her love for classical Arabic poetry represents a connection to a specific cultural and linguistic heritage, showcasing a different facet of her intellectual and emotional landscape. This is not the monolithic, unchanging "Orient" of Said's critique but a vibrant literary tradition that resonates deeply with her. Aaliya recalls her discovery of this tradition:

I recall the poet who ignited the flame, Antara, the jet-black warrior-poet. I remember the shock of a doomed language being resuscitated. And I remembered you as spears quenched their thirst In me and white swords dripped with my blood. So I longed to kiss the blades that recalled. The gleam of your smiling mouth to my mind ..Then again, maybe it was Imru' al-Qays. He and Antara are my preferred of the seven in the legendary Suspended Odes. (Alameddine, 2013, p. 14)

Aaliya's distinction between the "odd and displaced" classical Arabic of modern media and the "alchemy" of early poetry is significant. She engages with her heritage selectively, finding profound meaning and sensuous pleasure ("more exquisite than the discovery of love") in its artistic expressions, specifically pre-Islamic poetry, rather than adhering uncritically to contemporary formal usage. This nuanced relationship with her cultural background dismantles the Orientalist notion of a homogenous, static Arab culture (Said, 1978). Her passion for Antara and Imru' al-Qays presents a specific, historically grounded connection to Arab literary tradition that is personal, intellectual, and aesthetic. It adds a crucial layer to her identity, showing her not as assimilated into the West but as someone who navigates multiple

literary worlds, drawing strength and definition from both. This complexity inherently de-Orientalises her portrayal.

In contrast, the next thought reveals a complex and nuanced dynamic between identity, language, and cultural authenticity. The poet draws a sharp contrast between the bitter, formal Arabic that dominates media and political rhetoric and the lived, everyday experience of the Lebanese dialect that fills everyday life (Kristeva, 1980). The employment of "odd and displaced" to characterize classical Arabic emphasizes how formalized language, while formally prestigious, is even to Indigenous speakers whose cultural identity hinges on local vernacular speech experienced as alienating or spurious. This tension is symptomatic of broader postcolonial and linguistic debates around language as a site of power, belonging, and resistance:

The language—we hear it all the time. News anchors speak classical Arabic, as do some politicians, definitely Arabic teachers, but what sputters out of their mouths sounds odd and displaced compared to our organic Lebanese tongue, our homemade, homegrown dialect. Television and radio announcers sound foreign to my ears. Those early poems, though, are alchemy, something miraculous. They opened my ears, opened my mind, like flowers in water. (Alameddine, 2013, p. 14)

Furthermore, the categorization of "early poems" as "alchemy" and "something miraculous" lifts classical Arabic poetry from its application as a mere language to an art form, surpassing the estrangement felt in formal speech. The poem's simile of "opening ears" and "opening minds" like "flowers in water" signifies a living, organic engagement with a heritage that is intellectual and sensual at once. This empathetic comprehension challenges Orientalist constructions of Arab culture as fixed or monolithic by revealing that identification with language and heritage is adaptive, creative, and highly idiosyncratic (Said, 1978). It questions the alienation caused by institutionalized language models and the revolutionary potential of classical Arabic poetry to redefine the speaker's identity. It subverts Orientalist binarisms between actual vernacular and high classical culture, highlighting how Arab identity is negotiated through linguistic and literary practice. Alameddine resists reductive representations of Arab culture, projecting its fluidity and complexity.

While *An Unnecessary Woman* (2013) uses intertextuality to explore the rich internal life of one character resisting societal and Orientalist labels, Laila Lalami's *The Other Americans* (2019) employs it across multiple perspectives to examine the complexities of Arab American identity within the contemporary socio-political landscape of the United States. The novel investigates how external pressures, particularly post-9/11 Islamophobia and anti-immigrant sentiment, shape the characters' sense of self and belonging. Intertextuality here functions less as an internal refuge (as for Aaliyah) and more as a site of connection, conflict, and negotiation with heritage in the face of external stereotyping (Lowe, 1996; Yegenoglu, 1998). Driss Guerraoui, the Moroccan immigrant father whose death catalyzes the novel's plot, is central to this intertextual negotiation. His relationship with his cultural heritage, particularly classical Arabic poetry, is a poignant counterpoint to the often-hostile American environment he navigates. His daughter, Nora, reflects on this connection, revealing how literature provided him solace and a means of retaining identity:

[My father] had often outrun disaster—the protests in Casablanca had moved him to California; the arson had made it possible for him to buy a diner. However, now disaster had finally caught up with him. [...] Nothing about what happened made any sense. (Lalami, 2019, p. 39)

Here, Driss's story is the classic immigrant one, in which the implied association with Arabic literature represents the cultural background, and his Moroccan birth is a protective barrier against the bewildering forces of assimilation and racism. The arson attack on his first store after 9/11 graphically illustrates Orientalist distrust of Arab Americans. His hypothetically converting to poetry is not a nostalgic move; it is a preservation, a means of accessing a part of himself "interred under the burden of expectation and stereotype," as Nora characterizes her engagement with identity down the line (Lalami, 2019, p. 148). This intertextual element—his association with a rich literary and cultural tradition—richens Driss, de-Orientalising the potentially reductionist narrative of "immigrant struggles" by highlighting his intellectual and emotional alignment with his heritage. It upends the immigrant stereotype of simple economic ambition or cultural lack, presenting instead a man struggling with the depths of identity and history (Said, 1978 & Spivak, 1988).

Beyond Driss's connection to his past, *The Other Americans* (2019) uses intertextuality by placing its diverse characters firmly within the web of contemporary American life, cultural references, social dynamics, and legal/political discourses. This grounding in the specific realities of American society serves to de-orientalize the characters by showing them not as exotic outsiders but as integral, albeit often marginalized, parts of the American fabric (Said, 1978). The novel references popular culture, the anxieties of small-town life, the workings of the justice system, and the lingering effects of the Iraq War (through the character of Jeremy), creating a narrative tapestry woven from distinctly American threads yet featuring characters often subjected to Orientalist othering.

Nora Guerraoui, the American-born daughter, embodies this complex navigation. She is deeply American in her experiences and cultural reference points, yet constantly negotiates the assumptions and stereotypes projected onto her because of her heritage. Her interactions reveal the subtle, everyday ways *Orientalism* manifests (Said, 1978). Her journey involves reclaiming parts of her heritage (like understanding her father more deeply) while simultaneously asserting her place as an American. Her frustration with simplistic categorizations is palpable. Reflecting on the aftermath of her father's death and the ensuing investigation, she grapples with the inadequacy of simple narratives:

I began to realise how unprepared I was for this day in court. It hadn't even occurred to me to tell anyone at my father's restaurant about the arraignment or to ask if they might like to come to court with us. Again, I felt a surge of irritation at my sister for not canceling her clinic appointments that morning. It was as if she were trying to send me a message: You deal with this. I've done enough. I knew, of course, that she was still angry about the life insurance money, but of all the ways to make a statement about it, she'd chosen the most hurtful to me and the most damaging to the case (Lalami, 2019, p. 154)

Furthermore, this passage shows Nora grappling not with ancient texts but with the immediate, harsh intertext of the American legal system and familial expectations. Her frustration stems from the reduction of her father's life and death to a "case" and her family's complex dynamics to simple anger over money. The scene in the courtroom, a key site of American civic life, becomes a space where Orientalist assumptions (about who deserves justice and whose presence matters) subtly play out. Nora's internal monologue reveals her navigating American institutions and social codes, trying to make sense of a tragedy within a familiar and alien system:

Because why would anyone care about a dead man if the only people present at the hearing were his wife and daughter? And how could anyone believe that someone like Baker was capable of premeditated

killing when all his friends and family, the little girl and the pretty brunette included, were there for him? (Lalami, 2019, p. 154)

Lalami's (2019) critique of systemic injustice and selective compassion uses irony and comparison to reveal social prejudice and whose lives are valued. The corpse, a marginalized foreigner, is ignored, whereas Baker, a privileged subject, is granted community solidarity. Baker's "friends and family" demonstration of respectability politics juxtaposes the victim's isolation. Lalami refers to intersectional erasure, whereby race, class, and social capital determine believability and how structural violence operates through generalized complicity. Additionally, the narrative uses the conventions of a mystery/legal drama but populates it with characters whose identities are constantly being read and misread through cultural lenses. This contemporary American intertextuality engaging with legal procedures, family dynamics within an American context, and the very architecture of the courthouse de-Orientalises the experience by showing the deeply American nature of the characters' struggles, even as those struggles are inflected by their specific cultural background and the prejudices they face (Said, 1978 & Spivak; 1988).

Comparing the two novels reveals distinct but complementary strategies of using intertextuality for de-orientalization. Rabih Alameddine's Aaliya in *An Unnecessary Woman* (2013) achieves de-Orientalization primarily through an internal, intellectual process. Her profound engagement with and translation of mainly Western literature constructs an identity that asserts intellectual autonomy and complexity, directly refuting Orientalist stereotypes about Arab women's supposed lack of agency or philosophical depth. Her additional connection to classical Arabic poetry adds another layer, preventing her from being seen as merely assimilated and highlighting a nuanced, self-chosen relationship with her heritage (Allen, 2011). Her resistance is private, a fortification of the self against a world perceived as hostile or irrelevant. She states about her translation system, highlighting its necessity:

However, I'm fluent in only three languages: Arabic, English, and French. So, I invented my special system: to achieve the most accurate representation of a work, I used a French and an English translation to create an Arabic one. It is a functional and well-planned system that allows me to enjoy what I do. I know this makes my translation one step further removed from the original, like Kadare's English novels, but it is the method I continue to use. Those are the rules I chose. I became a servant, albeit voluntarily, of a discipline, a specific ritual. I am my system, and my system is me. (Alameddine, 2013, p. 49)

Aaliya is her system; her identity is inextricably linked to this intertextual practice, a self-defined space that resists external categorization. In contrast, Laila Lalami's *The Other Americans* uses intertextuality more externally and socially. The novel examines how identities are shaped, stereotyped, and negotiated within the public sphere of contemporary America. Driss's connection to Arabic poetry provides internal strength but is set against the external realities of post-9/11 prejudice. Nora navigates a landscape filled with American cultural signifiers, legal systems, and social assumptions, where her identity is constantly under scrutiny. The novel's polyphony emphasizes the diversity of Arab American experiences, directly countering the monolithic view inherent in *Orientalism* (Said, 1978). The intertextual references are less about building an internal fortress (like Aaliya) and more about showing characters interacting with and being impacted by American society's multiple textual and cultural layers. The mystery plot becomes an intertextual frame through which Lalami explores prejudice and the difficulty of achieving justice when Orientalist assumptions cloud perception. The novel asks, as Nora implicitly does when confronting the limitations of the investigation:

Something isn't right. If this was just an accident, why didn't the driver stay at the scene and wait for the police? Why didn't anyone see anything? (Lalami, 2019, p. 110)

This questioning of the official narrative, the search for a more profound truth obscured by circumstance or prejudice, reflects the novel's broader project of using a familiar American genre (the mystery) to deconstruct assumptions about its Arab American characters. In conclusion, *An Unnecessary Woman* (2013) and *The Other Americans* (2019) powerfully demonstrate intertextuality's capacity to de-orientalise the self. Alameddine achieves this through Aaliya's deep, internal, and intellectually defiant engagement with global literature, constructing a complex subjectivity that refuses simplification. Lalami uses a broader range of intertextual references, cultural, literary, social, and political, through different characters to expose the varied realities of Arab American existence and to resist the outside stereotypes imposed upon them in a particular American context. Together, these novels demonstrate how contemporary Arab American authors use intertextuality to enrich their narratives aesthetically and as a form of cultural resistance, reclaiming narrative agency and portraying fluid, multifaceted identities that resist reduction. In doing so, they play a vital role in challenging and dismantling the enduring legacy of *Orientalism*.

CONCLUSION

This analysis of Laila Lalami's *The Other Americans* (2019) and Rabih Alameddine's *An Unnecessary Woman* (2013) demonstrates the crucial role of intertextuality as a literary device for the de-orientalization of Arab and Arab American identities. Both novels employ richly interconnected webs of textual allusion stretching from classical Arabic literature through Western canonical texts to contemporary cultural and social discourse to challenge and subvert the oversimplifying affirmatively, typically exoticizing stereotypes inherent in Orientalist narrative, as Edward Said questions. In doing so, they portray characters whose selves are sophisticated, nuanced, and resistant to reduction. The comparative study finds distinct but complementary strategies. Alameddine, in the character of Aaliya Saleh, claims an internal model of de-Orientalization. Aaliya's intense, personalized engagement in translating and reading primarily Western and classical Arab literature produces a rich inner world that establishes intellectual autonomy and emotional depth, actively countering the Orientalist stereotype of the passive or intellectually impoverished Arab woman. Her identity is created through this intertextual exchange, offering an individual form of resistance and self-definition.

By comparison, Lalami employs intertextuality on a more external, social plane within a polyphonic novel. *The Other Americans* (2019) situates its characters firmly in contemporary American life, analysing how their identities are negotiated, stereotyped, and asserted against American cultural norms, legal structures, popular culture, and the lingering effects of historical events like 9/11 and the Iraq War. The intertextual references here function less as an inner refuge and more as spaces of contact, tension, and accommodation, inscribing the bodily experience of navigating a hybrid identity in a society routinely constructed by Orientalist prejudice. The novel uses the familiar narrative pattern of American genres (family drama, mystery) to expose the complexities and injustices of life for its Arab American multi-community subjects. Both Alameddine and Lalami ultimately demonstrate intertextuality as a formal choice and a potent strategy of cultural resistance. By placing their narratives in a rich field of textual and artistic references, they reclaim narrative power, showing Arab and Arab American subjectivity to be dynamic, striated, and informed by an eclectic mix of influences rather than monolithic or one-dimensional and grounded on narrow external definitions. This intertextual tactic enhances the depiction of individual characters and significantly contributes to the broader project of undermining hegemonic discourses. These

novels powerfully illustrate how minority literature in the current age can use sophisticated literary methods to undermine stereotypes, stake out authentic voices, and construct narrative spaces that represent the real complexity of human identity in an interconnected, globalized world.

REFERENCES

1. Alameddine, R. (2013). *An Unnecessary Woman*. Grove Press.
2. Allen, G. (2011). *Intertextuality* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
3. Althusser, L. (1971). Ideology and ideological state apparatuses. In *Lenin and Philosophy and other essays* (pp. 127–186). London: New Left Books.
4. Amireh, A. (2000). Framing Nawal El Saadawi: Arab feminism in a transnational world. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 26(1), 215–249.
5. Amireh, A. (2021). *The Factory Girl and the Seamstress: Imagining Gender and Class in Nineteenth-Century American Fiction*. Routledge.
6. Bakhtin, M. M. (1981). *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (C. Emerson & M. Holquist, Trans.). University of Texas Press.
7. Barthes, R. (1977). *Image—Music—Text* (S. Heath, Trans.). Hill and Wang.
8. Basu, L. (2021). Memory, Trauma, and the "Implicated Subject" of the War On Terror In Laila Lalami's *The Other Americans*. *Studies in the Novel*, 53(1), 36–53.
9. Edouihri, A. (2021). Othering and disillusionment in Laila Lalami's *The Other Americans*. *African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal*, 14(1), 1–8.
10. El Boubekri, A. (2024). New ways of belonging in diaspora in Laila Lalami's *The Other Americans*. *African Identities*, 22(4), 926-942.
11. Fadda-Conrey, C. (2014). *Contemporary Arab-American Literature: Transnational Reconfigurations of Citizenship and Belonging*. New York University Press.
12. Hassan, W. S. (2014). *Immigrant narratives: Orientalism and cultural translation in Arab American and Arab British literature*. Oxford University Press.
13. Kristeva, J. (1980). *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. Columbia University Press.
14. Lalami, L. (2019). *The Other Americans*. Pantheon Books.
15. Letaief, S. K., & Amrieh, Y. A. (2022). The passive antihero in Alameddine's *I, the Divine* and *An Unnecessary Woman*. *Anglo Saxonica*, 20(1).
16. Madiou, M. S. E. (2021). Abject talks gibberish: "Translating" abjection in Rabih Alameddine's *An Unnecessary Woman*. *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 43(3), 249–267
17. Mohammed, W. Z. (2023). *Representing Cosmopolitanism Through Narrative in Leila Aboulela's Bird Summons and Laila Lalami's The Other Americans* (Doctoral dissertation, Middle East University).
18. Mohanty, C. T. (1991). Under Western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses. In C. T. Mohanty, A. Russo, & L. Torres (Eds.), *Third world women and the politics of feminism* (pp. 51–80). Indiana University Press.
19. Muecke, F. (1982). A portrait of the artist as a young woman. *The Classical Quarterly*, 32(1), 41–55.
20. Rivaldy, P. M. R., Budiman, M., & Tambunan, S. M. G. (2019). Muslim diasporic identities in Kamila Shamsie's home fire (2017). *International Review of Humanities Studies*, 4(3), 12.
21. Said, E. W. (1978). *Orientalism*. Pantheon Books.
22. Salaita, S. (2011). *Modern Arab American Fiction: A Reader's Guide*. Syracuse University Press.
23. Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture* (pp. 271–313). University of Illinois Press.

24. Yegenoglu, M. (1998). *Colonial Fantasies: Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism*.