THE CITY: A PLACE FOR REINVENTION

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Abstract

In Hanan al-Shaykh's 2001 novel Only in London, *four characters from very different national, social, sexual and cultural backgrounds are thrown together on a flight from Dubai to London where their stories of migration, exile, loss and escape intersect and intertwine. In this city scape, the characters negotiate new 'selves' breaking out of the stereotypical roles their cultures had required of them. In this fluid and multi-layered world, their dreams of reinvention are played out highlighting new images of the heterogeneity of Arab cultures. This paper will investigate how the city and the characters interact allowing spaces for new identities to develop in, on one level a bordered and defined area of streets and buildings but on another level, a dynamic and fluid environment.*

Keywords: freedom, otherness, the city

1. Introduction

Hanan al-Shaykh is a Lebanese writer who lives in London. Before *Only in London*, she had written eight novels centring on the lives of women, marriage and relationships between the sexes in Arab society. One of her earlier works *The Story of Zahra* was banned in Lebanon. All in all, Hanan al-Shaykh has written ten novels, a book of short stories and two plays. She left Lebanon in 1975 to escape the civil war living in Saudi Arabia before coming to London. Although she was brought up in a strict Shia household, she married a Christian against her father's wishes, as well as writing a biography of her mother, who was illiterate, including her affair with a younger man and eventual divorce from Hanan's father and marriage to her lover. Hanan al-Shaykh's book *Only in London* is located geographically, in and around, Edgware Road, including such establishments as; the Dorchester, Claridge's, the Mayfair and the Park Lane, as well as the British Telecom (BT) tower. Lebanese restaurants line the streets, *abaya*- clad women from the Gulf States mix with a multitude of other groups who maintain a presence in this multi-national area of London. It is within this area that the characters are able to create their own cultural space in London. It is a place where diasporic settlements arise, in addition to hybrid identities. This is a city where globalisation,

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the movement of people, goods and capital come together, privileging some, but marginalising others. It is in this wealthy area of Edgware Road, where rich Gulf Arabs have seemingly transplanted their culture and lifestyle, privilege and power intact, and it is between the fissures and gaps within in this space where the four protagonists engage with the local and global communities. Not only do the protagonists depend on these wealthy Arabs for their livelihoods, it provides the familiarity of home but also the freedom to re-invent themselves away from the ostracism, familial and societal disapproval they suffered in their homelands and which they have escaped from in coming to London. Although the area is bounded by streets, buildings and territorial borders, these borders are porous as goods, people and capital flow in and out.

The story revolves around the lives of four characters whose lives are thrown together during a bout of turbulence on a plane from Dubai to London. Samir, dressed in a Versace shirt and cowboy boots, highlighting his sexual ambiguity, wanders into business class looking for a sedative for the capuchin monkey full of diamonds he was tricked into smuggling on the pretext it was an ill girl's loved pet, while Amira, a high-class hooker from Morocco, who had been working in Dubai, screams in fear of God's punishment as a consequence of the ill-gotten gains she had procured from her Dubai clients. Lamis, an Iraqi divorcee, returning to London after a failed business venture, searches for her passport which she has dropped and Nicholas, an Englishman, on secondment from Sotheby's, who now works for an Omani collector of Islamic daggers, inadvertently finds it under the seat in front of him.

The plane also acts as a metaphor for the shrinking distances between countries and cultures, it is in London where distance becomes a space for misunderstanding and negotiation rather than a physical presence and it is the streets of London where the East and the West meet and it is within these spaces the characters challenge their prescribed roles of fatherhood, the obedient wife, a dutiful daughter and a lost soul drifting between cultures, unsettled and unmoored. It is the cityscape of London where traditional spatial or geographic limits are erased and redrawn through the 'perceived' London each character imagines and the physicality that disrupts, intertwining with the multi-layered lives of each character.

However, in this story there is a fifth character and that is London itself. It is the relationship with the city that the characters' dreams and desires are fulfilled, diverted, and tested. According to Susan Alice Fischer, the characters "exist in a 'new' London, which has thrown off much of the pretense of providing a Welfare State, and they must make their way through, a capitalist system the best they can" (Fischer, 2004: 117). Consequently, it is in the service industry catering for the whims and desires of the privileged Arab elites where the characters are able to survive economically, warding off competition through the ability to read the

market place, keep up with the latest trends through resilience, innovation and being able to invent new personas to keep ahead of changing consumer demands.

Each character has an image of London and, it is within this framework that Hanan al-Shaykh explores the themes of Eastern and Western identity, love, sex, independence and freedom. In this story the Occidental and the Oriental clash, negotiate, and reconcile their hybrid identities. Each carries with them the secrets of their past lives and the dream that London will bring those dreams to life but London is also an imagined space where the reality sets up huddles which each character must traverse and conquer in order to move forward.

This paper will explore the themes of up-rootedness, loss, and exile all experienced in different ways as well as urban space, consumerism and identity politics is the hope for the freedom and independence denied them in their countries of origin in the ways in an ever-shrinking world not only relate to the 'other' but also the occidentals.

This paper will explore the way the city itself interacts with the characters making spaces for each to negotiate their own reinvention.

2. The City & Otherness

In the 21st century most people live in cities creating literary spaces for writers to explore the problems and possibilities city life offer its residents. This has led to the emergence of what is referred to as the urban novel and it is this genre that has been appropriated by migrant writers, such as, Hanan al-Shaykh, to discuss questions of migration, escape and exile. Although, for the characters London was a place of promised liberation, however, it is also a place with many pitfalls. For Amira, London offers the dream of riches as she re-invents herself as a Gulf princess while for Samir, it is the freedom to be who he really is, a gay man. Lamis, who had been married off to a rich, older man, to bring her family out of poverty, it offers the space to become a person rather than just a reflection in a mirror, unburdened from the restrictions imposed on her by her family and husband.

In this novel real and imagined spaces of home intertwine with geographic places associated with homeland and nation. In *Only in London,* home becomes the 'imagined' place of London. London is both a physical space and an imagined space. Although the characters are anchored to their homes and homelands through family, Samir has a wife and children in Dubai, Lamis has her parents in Beirut, Amira's family live in Morocco, 'home' is also a place of oppression. Samir was locked up in mental hospitals to 'cure' him of his homosexuality, Amira would have remained living in poverty, whose family had "wished' [for their] ... baby girl [to] return to the womb, and stay there while they prayed to God to change her

sex"(al-Shaykh, 2001: 68). Lastly, Lamis, who had been coerced into agreeing to an arranged marriage at 17 to an Iraqi businessman to alleviate the family finances. In this story Lamis is escaping a double bind, from the constraints of an unhappy marriage, and the familial obligations as wife and mother, but, also as a daughter. In fact, Lamis's life had been one of displacement and escape, firstly from the growth in religious fanaticism in the city of Najaf, where her father was a musician, to the safety of refugee camps in Syria and Lebanon, then from a failed marriage to Dubai, and consequently, as a result of a failed business to 'return' to her adopted home after her marriage to London. It is in London where Nicholas's vision of the 'Orient' is challenged at this work at Sotheby's that the Arab women who came to the auctions has been a fascination for the West for centuries and it is through the accumulation of academic texts, poems, travel writings that from these texts the West has derived a particular set of ideas of the Orient but rather than an objective study these assumptions have created a set of myths about the people and the places of the Orient into a monolithic whole.

According to Edward Said, "the relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, [and] of varying degrees of a complex hegemony" (1978: 5). This paradigm is played out when Nicholas invites his English friends to meet Lamis for dinner at his home. Lamis is not only silenced when the conversation moves to " a sphere of which she had not knowledge, total Englishness, in which she was incapable of being polite, hypocritical or inventive" (al-Shaykh 2001: 151) although having lived in London for several years and having a British passport Lamis had only been able to see London from the outside because "her ex-husband and his mother had closed the door to London in her face"(23) Lamis had throughout her life felt as if she as a person didn't exist, as it is only on seeing "the sight of her own reflection [which] seemed to confirm her existence" (21) because her body had become intertwined with the economic misfortunes of her family having left Najaf in fear of reprisal by Saddam Husain against Shia Muslims, her body being sold off to an older Iraqi businessman "sent from heaven to pull them out of poverty and give them back their dignity"(20).

Stuart Hall argues that language, like culture, gives meaning to our surroundings in providing "interpretive frameworks through which we make sense of the world" (Hall in Massey & Jess, 1995: 179). This might suggest then that "language is a shared, a collective social construction" through which individuals can "say what they mean" (Hall in Massey & Jess, 1995: 179) and it is within this social construction in which language is power, Amira is able to use words to construct her various roles and exploit her various men for money while Samir fails to seduce the young blond men who he 'picks up' because he can't say what he mean in English. Lamis feels inadequate as she is unable to partake in the conversations at a dinner party put on by Nicholas with his friends and it is only when his ex-girlfriend Alina, another foreigner like herself that she feels empowered to speak without being orientalised.

Nicholas, the only non-Arab character, floats between the East and the West as he travels between these two worlds, hating the "unfamiliarity and loneliness that confronted him every time he returned to London or went away to Oman" (al-Shaykh, 2001: 40). It is this unsettling of belonging, of being unmoored, in that globalisation interrupts his sense of cultural identity forcing in this case Nicholas to conceptualise culture and 'home' in different ways. Travelling between Oman and London, Nicholas's sense of belonging shifts as he is confronted with different traditions, genealogies which disrupt his sense of his own cultural belonging and the realisation that culture is not fixed, challenging the belief that events, practices, rituals and relationships can only be interpreted in one way. London may be the centre, but it is constantly being challenged from the margins as the flow of people and cultures make the city a place of continual change. When Nicholas visits Amira the "smell of un-English food wafting from the entrance of [her] block transported him back to Oman" (48) and it is only when he is on his way home on noticing "an Arab man negotiating a price with an Arab prostitute, in English" that "Edgware Road seemed suddenly very much part of London after all" (51).

Finally, to the 5th character that of the city of London, "the connecting link between all 4 characters" although their paths part "after they disembark at Heathrow" only to be reunited in the streets and events London throws up at them. It is within this city scape Samir and Lamis try to negotiate their new found freedom. The Edgware Road area offers new possibilities for Amira as she re-invents herself to suit the changing whims and fancies of her clients in the highly competitive sex industry. The character London also operates as "a kind of narrative map where the heterogeneity and multitude of persons and of places are somehow interconnected and made sensible through the novel" (Tally Jr, 2013: 88). It is the city itself which makes sense of the characters actions and imaginings through the interconnection of the reality and the imagined. It also allows the reader "to understand the emergence of new modes of experience" especially those "of the shifting structures of feeling of a given group at a particular time and of a particular place" (87).

The city not only helps the reader map the whereabouts of the characters but also their interaction with the actual spaces within a framework of codes, mores and expectations. It is "only the sight of the building opposite" the designated rendezvous point, a semi-derelict flat, to deliver the monkey with the diamonds that makes "Samir feel that he was actually in London" (al-Shaykh, 2001: 28), having imagined that he would be greeted by someone "wearing a silk robe, a cravat and leather slippers, standing at the door of a room with logs burning in the grate" (28) rather than sitting in a grimy flat waiting for the monkey to deliver the diamonds it had been made to swallow.

Throughout the novel al-Shaykh highlights the interaction between the imagined city, which the characters believe holds their dreams, and the real city which puts up hurdles as they negotiate their hybrid identities.

Samir can finally come out as the gay man he is, Lamis in her desire for economic and social freedom and the chameleon Amira through her many attempts at reinventing herself to keep the completion at bay as her many entrepreneurial schemes fail to deliver the monetary rewards hoped for.

Throughout the novel the city of London situates Amira, Samir and Lamis on the periphery, in the centre of the Arab area, around Edgware Road. It is from the margins that all the characters negotiate new hybrid identities that give them a feeling of belonging. When Samir first arrives in Edgware Road, he exclaims "It's incredible! Mazraa Street has moved to London!" (al-Shaykh, 2001: 23). Working in this Arab area of London, Amira is in a familiar cultural space where she can utilise her ability to switch from one Arabic accent to another, re-inventing herself by keeping abreast of the latest market trends and consumer tastes.

However, it is only when Amira and Samir leave central London at the end of the novel that the characters connect with London. On the death of her friend Nahid, Amira has to leave central London to attend the funeral at Walthamstow cemetery in Northeast London. Here she is confronted with the fact that the "English put cards with bunches of flowers, as if fully expecting that the dead would rise up and read them" (240). However, Nahid's death and her burial provided a space where Amira "could come to a stop and reflect" (240) in the realisation that she like Nahid no-longer belonged to Morocco and Egypt, where they had come from, London was now their home. Nahid's family refused the body being returned to Cairo, suggesting she should be buried "near her friends" who are "family now" (240). Samir is sent to Ealing in West London to pick up Nahid's coffin, finally leaving his Beirut in London, Edgware Road. It is through this disconnection with their past, that they can begin to belong.

According to Susan Alice Fischer it is "only when [Lamis] is able to reconcile this split vision, which comes from her experience of displacement, is Lamis able to feel a sense of belonging in London" (Fischer, 2004: 115) Hanan al-Shaykh uses the British Telecom tower to symbolise the migrants' marginalisation in that Lamis remains unmoored. Lamis by being able to "see London from above" (the BT tower) is able to piece together her own life because "the tower guides [her] like a lighthouse, as if [she is] a lost ship" (al-Shaykh, 2001: 263) Her life becomes a map like the streets below going in directions she had had no control over but it was her persistence that she finally got permission from the authorities. In other words, it is after this that she takes control over her body "and imagine[s] herself entering the flower shop she had always admired and asking for a job" (265). She is now liberated from the ghosts of her past and as she leaves "the tower she

recieve[s] a packet of chocolate and a folder with her name on it" which she opens to find a certificate stating she "had climbed the 158 metres above London on 14 November, 1999" (265/6). Just like her British passport this certificate acts as proof of no only her presence but her place in London. Unlike her ex-husband's flat that had nothing of her in it, the city on the other was now stamped with her presence.

3. Freedom & re-invention

Writing the city is not a new genre for al-Shaykh, who has previously written about Beirut. In *Only in London* each character is running away as well as seeking a haven where they can experience life in ways they were not able to before.

The Concise Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy defines Freedom as "rightful self-government (autonomy), and the overall ability to do, choose or achieve things, which can be called 'optionality' and defined as the possession of open options" (2000: 295). In other words, having the ability to be independent and, an option in respect of some possible actions which In *Only in London*, the concept of freedom focuses the personal options London offers the characters highlighting the lack of personal freedoms in their countries of origin.

For Samir, it is the freedom to be openly gay without the threat of being locked up to 'cure' him of his homosexuality, having been institutionalised as a teenager. It is also an escape from the responsibilities of fatherhood and the demands made by his wife to comply with his fatherly and husbandly duties. In other words, in the patriarchal society of Lebanon where he grew up, traditionally the father would be the breadwinner and provider for the family, and, as such, is accorded total authority, expecting respect and unquestioned compliance to his instructions, however, by running away Samir has clearly shirked his responsibilities leaving the decision making to his wife as well as providing financially for his children although sending his family money intermittently.

However, in London Samir's desire for blond, young men is often fraught with unforeseen consequences. Samir's naïve image of London as anything goes is problematic as he is often failed by his grasp of English leading him at one point to an AIDS clinic thinking it was a brothel. Samir gets himself out of one sticky situation only to find himself, in another, even more complex, as he negotiates his way through the pitfalls of unfamiliar courting rituals in his attempt to consummate his sexual desires with one of these youths, in addition to, misreading many of the codes clearly marking him as an 'outsider'. Samir as an 'outsider' also lives in fear that his next visa extension could be refused sending him back to the country that had had him committed to a 'hospital' after at the age of 15 throwing "stones at Salah's [his teacher who was also his lover] windows on his wedding day" where he was told by one of the nun's who cared for him that "Salah is a man and it's not right for you to live a man" (al- Shaykh, 2001: 236-7) This episode in Samir's life

has had a profound influence in 'queering' Samir's sexual preferences. After Salah finding out that he had "a hole too, like a girl", Samir's sexual awakening left him feeling "like a girl since I wore my sister's red dress" (237). Although Lebanese law doesn't explicitly criminalise homosexuality as framed under "Article 534 of the penal code, which prohibits sexual intercourse contrary to the order of nature" (Chamas: 2015) patriarchal values based on family, lineage and having children still prevail.

Samir, like Amira, came to London and the promise of wealth to escape the poverty in their own countries, however, it is the Arab area of Edgware Road that they work, servicing the needs of the wealthy Arab residents. However, although escaping poverty they are still at the bottom of the economic ladder, remaining on the fringes, Samir as an unskilled worker, working long hours by picking up odd jobs. He also entertains gamblers at the many casinos with his capuchin monkey, Cappuccino, as well as feeding expired parking meters in the hope of receiving tips from grateful punters. Therefore, London rather than fulfilling the promise of economic mobility has, instead rooted Samir on the periphery, marginalised and dependent on other people's wealth rather than becoming the agent of his own economic security. Samir like Amira, inhabit the seedier area of London where the lines between the legal and illegal are blurred. Amira, who has booked into a five-star hotel, for the purpose of applying her talents, is only saved from prosecution, after ringing a ruling prince from one of the Gulf States, who had alerted Special Branch (was part of Scotland Yard specialising in political violence and protecting VIPs). Amira convinces the police officers and the prince's Lebanese secretary that she was ill and unable to pay for treatment, hoping for the prince's generosity in helping a hapless woman in need. However, Amira, who "had beaten Scotland Yard once, made a fool of the Prince, and having his private secretary eating out of her hand" (al-Shaykh, 2001: 251), wasn't so lucky another time when she was exposed and badly beaten after posing as a princess from the respective prince's family. This was punishment "because she was a prostitute, a whore" (255). Amira had transgressed the rules which restrict women's sexuality and movements to one of sexually satisfying their husband's sexual needs for physical protection and economic security, as in the case of Lamis. Although, London gave Amira control over her body, however, her line of work in this wealthy Arab area where wealth allowed for some of the Gulf dignitaries to exercise the same power over women as if they were still in their country of origin, it didn't make her immune to male violence against women.

For Samir, sexual freedom translates into the belief that London is where "he belonged" and "nowhere else" (149). He walks the streets feeling that London is freedom, "you didn't have to feel guilty or embarrassed, and start leading a double life and end up ultimately frustrated" (149). For Samir, being in London meant "he was doing what he always wanted to do; make people laugh, and he was being paid for it, rather than doing it for nothing as he had for so many years" (149).

Amira relies on her ability to 'tell stories' to survive. She initially came to London working as a maid but managed to exploit London's entrepreneurial spirit in inventing various schemes in her goal to become rich resulting in her being foiled by one her prospective patsies and 'bashed up' while pretending to be a princess in distress living at the Dorchester, from not only the same country as her assailant but also from the same family. After this encounter Amira bruised and shamed became resolved to fight for the plight of women in Arab culture because it "could have been her father, brothers, cousins, any number of men from home beating her up" (al-Shaykh, 2001: 253-4).

Furthermore, this also reflects the wider issue of violence towards women particularly in the sex industry as Amira had "never understood why foreign prostitutes were subjected to violence" as "[a]ll the men she'd done business with up until then had left their authority at the door" (255). This was about family 'honour' being shouldered by women as well as control over the female body by men in Arab culture. In other words, her behaviour had brought 'shame on' his family, not the behaviour of men in his family. The beating wasn't about the fact that she had tried to extort money from him or that she'd impersonated a princess, it was "because she was a prostitute, a whore" (255). She had taken ownership of her body unlike Lamis who vomited after having to have sex with her husband. Hanan al-Shaykh doesn't allow this to be seen as a melody of Arab culture she makes a global connection. Amira is not so much shamed by her inability to fight off her abuser's blows but the fact "that she'd joined the ranks of the other foreigners and the English" (255).

Through this connection with all women Hanan challenges portrayals of Arab men oppressing women as oppression happens everywhere, it is borderless. As a good businesswoman Amira never misses an opportunity, recognising a niche in the market. Hanan is able to show how people behave differently when re-located to different places. Arab women are highly sought after in London's sex scene, not only by Western men but also those of the Gulf. What was normal to them in their own countries has become eroticised in London, in that women at 'home' were untouchable, hidden under *abayas* and kept out of reach by strict codes of honour. Here in London this 'forbidden fruit', is accessible and it is this "notion of a woman who'd been hidden away in the dark, wrapped in a black veil, like a packet of dates or henna" (75) that Amira is able to exploit in her reinvention. Amira's ability to switch from one dialect or Arabic accent to another, transforms and after noticing the multitude of Gulf names in the classified section of *What's On*, an entertainment magazine, she hatched her plan to become a princess. She would provide a service where they "would get what they wanted, in their own surroundings, and their own language, not in English that either condescended to them or stole their money" (75). The migrant experience is always one of the past but in the present.

Lamis's life had been fraught with disrupture and displacement as her family moved from Najaf in 1982 fearing the wrath of religious fundamentalism because her father was a musician, to Syria, then to Beirut. After being married off at 17 she went to London and, after her divorce, to Dubai, finally returning to London clutching the one thing she prized most, her British passport, "her life"(2). Although having a British passport "she felt that the country was remote from her, that she was still on the margins" (267). Lamis's desire for security and belonging is only resolved when she is allowed to the top of the BT tower. To gain access to the top of the building official clearance was needed as the tower was closed off to the public and in getting this Lamis realises "the British were like Arabs after all: they found loopholes in the regulations when necessary" (263). Al-Shaykh uses the rays of sunlight emanating from the sky above London as a metaphor for life, while Lamis sees not only London but her own life and her son, Khalid "surrounded, by electric wires, computer games, and by money" a distant memory of Iraq, "a country that was so far from her, in distance and in memory" (264).

Seeing London "like something lying in front of [her], without a past or a present, or like the past holding the present in its grasp" (266). It is only after this experience that Lamis knew she was truly independent, that she had broken from her past, in that it was her making life choices rather than having them made for her by her ex-husband and her mother-in-law. Until now "she had "felt she had been asleep all the years since, that she was just waking from her sleep in London" (267). Often the migrant remains on the margins due to their inability to initiate agency over events remaining side-lined and unmoored. It is through the spirit of a city, rather than its physical organisation of urbanisation that shapes its culture imbued by the way "the sun lit London, and that the sky was a protective skin. At any moment I expected to see God in human form, as he appeared in religious paintings, the light descending from his fingers like rods of water which had gradually become frozen overs hundreds of years" (264). It is a city of customs and traditions, attitudes, sentiments rooted in the habits of its inhabitants that map out the city of London in al-Shaykh's narrative.

Al-Shaykh disrupts stereotypical images of otherness by exploring such commonalities as love, marriage, friendship and endeavour ending on a positive note in the words of Nicholas's father, "there's willingness for dialogue, whatever the religion, whatever the nationality" (79). It is through the interactions and the dialogues her characters have that Hanan al-Shaykh confronts the issues that divide people as well as emphasizing that differences don't just exist between cultures but within cultures. Amira's mother has the money Amira gives her 'cleansed' by the "pious old lady" from downstairs, "not with water but with her prayers and incantations" (256) before placing it on the Qur'an as well as her mother drawing a 'blue eye' on each note.

In this city scape in which anonymity allows for certain individual freedoms, there are also repercussions for the choices one makes, which are made even harder for those on the margins trying to belong. However, London is portrayed as a place where everyone can create spaces where they are able to create a niche for themselves, but this doesn't happen instantly it is a long and hard process of negotiation, compromise and an awareness of difference as well as sameness.

4. Conclusions

Al-Shaykh uses popular culture in a city scape creating characters and places, creating spaces to explore human whims, frailties and differences. It is through these human fallibilities that al-Shaykh explores the migrant experience breaking down barriers of difference through, a slightly simplistic mantra that 'love' conquers all. By creating an English character as someone who is also lost and searching for a sense of belonging, Hanan al-Shaykh seems to suggest that 'belonging' is not only multi-layered but it isn't only for migrants but everyone has to find his or her own way in a world that is often confusing, lonely and set with challenges in an on-going process. It is a commonality that draws all people together. By exploring the interdependency of each member of the group on each other, as well as the city itself, in linking their stories to the casinos, the BT tower, Sotheby's, and the hotels Hanan al-Shaykh links their stories with the on-going urbanisation and globalisation of cities in time and space as aeroplanes make distances dissolve and culture defy borders along with consumerism. It is through Amira that the migrant never really loses a sense of 'homeland' searching for the familiar and it is the recognition of this in the highly competitive sex industry inspiring her "to reinvent herself as, a precious jewel, accessible to only those who knew the secret" (al-Shaykh, 2001: 75).

Globalisation has meant borders have become porous not only for people but cultures allowing for cultural taboos to be broken in the belief that cities offer anonymity, however, this is a false assumption that Amira was to find out when her prospective client was able to find out not only her Moroccan name but her family history.

Cities may offer opportunities, but they are also places of surprises albeit in Amira's case unpleasant ones, distance as escape is also fluid and changeable as the physical world moves closer through high speed and cheap travel but digital communication.

Al-Shaykh in locating her story in Edgware Road and Marble Arch area of London, defined by its Lebanese restaurants, shisha café's and foods from the orient may imitate a migrant's homeland but it only part of the process of belonging and a space where the familiar helps in confronting their new home London. Although memories of home maybe disturbing and repressive, these memories also serve to

empower and guide the migrant subject. Hanan al-Shaykh utilises the familiar to highlight the breaking down of barriers of culture and distance in that culture transcends physical and psychological borders and it reinvented as part of the home-making of the migrant. Rather than dreaming of a lost past the migrant is very much in the present as place is never static at all, but a site that is always "becoming" and is always in the process of being made. "Place is a continual and dynamic state of formation, a process intimately bound up with the culture and identity of its inhabitants" (Ashcroft in Bayeh, 2015:11). Place, is pivotal in the re-invention of the characters' new hybrid identities in providing spaces to challenge the vestiges of orientalism, marginalisation and the city in an on-going process of resistance, disruption and negotiation. It is through the migrants' double consciousness in terms of cultural values and mores that exposes the heterogeneity of London and its ability along with its inhabitants to reinvent itself. She also utilises memories of home as a concept of empowerment for the characters to reinvent themselves and their identities.

At the end of the novel all the characters have found ways to resist the "gendered and classed relations that have followed them the Middle East and the orientalising and economically marginalising impulses from the imperial city" (Fischer, 2004: 117). All of them have been able to find 'home' by breaking free from the societal norms. Samir is able to be openly gay, Lamis is can determine her own future having broken free of family obligations which had reduced to a commodity to be traded for her family's financial security while Amira obtains economic power by masquerading as Middle Eastern stereotypes which play into the gendered power relations between men and women. Nicholas can only find home by leaving London and spending time in Oman, by understanding the Orient he is finally able to understand his own country and Lamis.

Each character has been able to resist the destinies mapped out for them by the circumstances of cultural and familial obligations re-inventing new 'selves' as they tenuously negotiate and disrupt being 'othered', finally to a position of belonging and 'home'. Each character arrived in London with an individual story representing the diversity of cultures and histories of the Middle East but also invariably linked to Western countries through shared histories, albeit imperial ones as well as the West's dependence on the Middle East's wealth in the form of rich Gulf Arabs spending their summers in the numerous five-star hotels London offers.

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