

# Jamal Mahjoub's *The Fugitives* and Hala Alyan's *The Arsonists' City*: A Panoramic View of the Occident

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**Abstract**—Contemporary Anglophone diasporic Arab writers have initiated an “Occidental discourse” through which they depict a complete image of the Occident. Their narratives are not meant to distort or misrepresent the “other”, but to provide the reader with nuanced accounts about what an Arab immigrant/refugee may experience in the “West”. These narratives are deemed consistent because contemporary Anglophone diasporic Arab writers have become part of their host countries’ sociocultural tapestry since they are, in most cases, part of European countries’ population. By applying Zahia Salhi’s definition of Occidentalism to Arab-British novelist Jamal Mahjoub’s *The Fugitives* (2021) and Arab-American novelist Hala Alyan’s *The Arsonists’ City* (2021), this paper aims to illustrate how both writers paint a three-dimensional panoramic picture of the Occident by exploring triumphant as well as depressing journeys of Arab individuals in America. This study is also an attempt to demonstrate, by using these two novels as examples, that Occidentalism cannot be defined as “Orientalism in reverse” since Occidental literature, as Salhi proposes, represents Western life and culture with a great sense of impartiality.

**Index Terms**—Occidentalism, *The Fugitives*, *The Arsonists’ City*, Anglophone diasporic Arab writers

## I. INTRODUCTION

In *Arab Representations of the Occident: East-West encounters in Arabic fiction* (2006), Rasheed El-Enany traces the early encounter between Arabs (East) and Europeans (West). His book illustrates how Arab intellectuals approached the Western colonizer in the late eighteenth century and produced many fictional and non-fictional accounts about different aspects of the life of the “Other”. According to El-Enany, Arab intelligentsia was mainly divided into two groups: those who were fascinated with the Western culture and called for the need to emulate it in order to have better living conditions, and those who saw “the European other [as] 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” (El-Enany, 2006, p. 2). The latter group adopted an ambivalent attitude towards the “West”. They projected it as both “malady and . . . remedy” (El-Enany, 2006, p. 3) for their belief that European countries were the colonizers who held hegemonic power over Arab territories, and at the same time they brought with them a more developed lifestyle that Arab intellectuals saw as a role model to be emulated since they believed that “to gain freedom from Western domination, the western life model had to be adopted” (El-Enany, 2006, p. 4). El-Enany’s remark implies that Arab scholars, by looking up at the Western model of life, had initially promoted the notion that the “West” can bestow the East some of its blessings if the former’s culture and life had been properly imitated. However, this optimistic view of the “West” was not the controlling ideology of all Arab intellectuals. Some paralleled their optimistic view with that of their pessimistic one.

In the twenty-first century, Anglophone diasporic Arab writers adopt almost the same ambivalent attitude towards the Occident. Their narratives depict the pros and cons of resettling in or traveling to the “West”. They introduce the reader to different experiences within the same plotline. The diversity of their characters’ educational, social, and economic statures in a text can show that their aim is to depict the various possible ends of an Arab immigrant’s/ refugee’s journey in the “West”. This panoramic, albeit ambivalent, view of the Occident adds another dimension to our understanding of Occidentalism. That is, in the case of having different possible ends of the lives of Arab immigrants/refugees, Occidentalism becomes then an objective representation of the Occident established by Arab intellectuals who have first-hand experiences of the West, not as travelers, but settlers. This chimes with Zahia Salhi’s definition of Occidentalism as “a diverse set of relationships of Orientals who have experienced the Occident in a variety of manners” (Salhi, 2021, p. 205). Unlike the orientalists’ misrepresentation of the “Other” (Al-Ghalith & Shalabi, 2021), these representations are free of prejudice, antagonism, stereotyping, and distortion of the image of the “Other”. Consequently, “Occidental discourse” is of great value since it offers Arab audiences free visas to the

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“West” to momentarily live an accurate Arab immigrant’s/refugee’s experience of surviving or thriving in the “West”. Moreover, Occidental literature acts like travel guides who take their clients on a tour around their destination and provide them with important facts about sites and places they are visiting.

Hala Alyan’s *The Arsonists’ City* (2021) and Jamal Mahjoub’s *The Fugitives* (2021), establish a panoramic view of Arabs’ experiences in the United States. The two narratives trace the journey of Arab individuals who either settle in or travel to the United States for the sake of achieving fame and economic prosperity. The journey of Mazna, a female Syrian immigrant to the United States, is largely the focus of Alyan’s novel. Mazna represents Arabs whose belief in the ‘myth of the West’ drives them to do whatever it takes to gain access to the so-called lands of opportunities without thinking of the consequences of their decision. In flashbacks, the narrative reveals that she has always dreamt of becoming a Hollywood famous actress like those she is used to watching on TV. Her confidence in her acting talent and aptitude drives her to accept Idris’s proposal and travel to the USA so that she could achieve her dream of becoming a Hollywood star. However, her disillusionment with the Western film industry eventually causes her to give up her dream of becoming a well-known Hollywood actress. She finally finds herself as a mere housewife and grandmother whose past haunts her from now and then as a reminder of her naïveté when she believed and sought the embellished image of the USA as well as Hollywood. Still, if Mazna represents Arab immigrants who have failed to thrive in the “West”, Idris, her husband, is the representative of those who could make it in America. Idris’s success can denote that there is hope for Arab immigrants to flourish if they seize the opportunities the “West” may offer.

In *The Fugitives*, Rushdy and his band’s success as well as their quest to preserve their integrity after being stigmatized as opportunist asylum seekers in America can evince Mahjoub’s propensity to draw a complete picture of what an Arab immigrant/refugee can experience in the United States. As an observer, Rushdy, the protagonist, reflects on America as a savior that could offer him what his home country has failed to and as a country that stereotypes Arab immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers as a threat to the Americans’ welfare.

## II. HALA ALYAN’S *THE ARSONISTS’ CITY*: A DREAM DEFERRED, A DREAM FULFILLED

Hala Alyan’s *The Arsonists’ City* (2021) sheds light on the failure of a diasporic female Arab, Mazna, to achieve her dream of becoming a movie star or a Hollywood actress. In flashbacks, the narrative reveals Mazna’s past insatiable desire to leave Syria and persuade her dream of becoming a movie star in the “West”. As a schoolgirl, she has been sure that is a gifted actress since her teachers have always encouraged her to perform, on different occasions, Shakespearian tragedies in her school’s theater. She believed that her performance skill could qualify her to later become a movie star like those she used to watch on TV or in cinemas. Her meeting with Idris, the wealthy Lebanese young man, paves the way for her to achieve her dream and arrive in the USA. After their marriage, Mazna and Idris move to California for Idris has received a letter of acceptance to complete his medical studies and work as a doctor at a hospital. As incidents unfold, the reader learns about Mazna’s disappointment the moment she realizes that the theater roles she used to perform in Syria can boost her as a perfect actress only in her country, not in America. Her several attempts to have a chance to act in front of a camera appear to be with no avail; either she is rejected or assigned racial roles in which she is a representative of the Middle Eastern repressed woman. However, the narrative also unveils Idris’ success in the same country. Idris arrives in America as a newly married student who lives with his spouse in a small rented apartment and ends up as a professional cardiologist who owns a house and has another in Lebanon. The novel ends when the family collectively decides to preserve their legacy by settling in Lebanon and keeping their house in Beirut.

Literature on the novel is scarce because it was only recently published. In “Acting Across Diaspora: Transnational Spaces and Voices in Hala Alyan’s *The Arsonists’ City*” (2022), Majed Aladylah states that “Mazna needs to be recognized, heard and praised, and she believes that there is a future for her in acting” (Aladylah, 2022, p. 4). If we were to modify Aladylah’s statement, we would replace “in acting” with “Hollywood and America”. Hence, Mazna’s process of self-realization is interrupted or further blocked by her disillusionment with America. She realizes that only a few routes are open for a diasporic Arab to survive in the “West” when “filmmakers and movie directors want [her] only to act in movies related to terrorism, extremism and violence” (Aladylah, 2022, p. 7). In his article “Photographs, Diaspora, and Identity: Homecoming in Hala Alyan’s *The Arsonists’ City*” (2022), Yousef Abu Amrieh accentuates the important role of photography in the novel as he states that “photographs play a crucial role in unveiling a person’s identity” (Abu Amrieh, 2022b, p. 634) and “a crucial role in the development of the plot” (Abu Amrieh, 2022b, p. 62); Ava, by deciphering the family’s photographs, could finally discover her true identity.

Watching movies repeatedly is the main cause of Mazna’s infatuation with acting. It has been the time for her to watch movies that mainly revolve around Western women’s emancipation. Also, her teacher, later, assigns her different roles and encourages her to study the performances of different American actresses so that she can learn their craft. Thus, she immerses herself in viewing Western movies by dedicating most of her time to watching and re-watching popular Western movies of the mid-twentieth century. She meets a new kind of liberated women who are free to “get pregnant and run away... marry . . . divorce. . . scream at their reflections” (Alyan, 2021, p. 119). As a young girl, Mazna is somehow not fully aware of the effect of such movies on her perception of the world as she is only keen on copying the actresses’ performance. However, when she grows up with such scenes engraved in her memory, she becomes more determined to persuade her dream in the “West”. The reflection of characters’ inner feelings through watching is a technique Alyan repeatedly uses (see Abu Amirah, 2020c).

As a coming-of-age text, the narrative explores different phases in Mazna's life. Her talent is remarkably enhanced, and she develops a stronger attachment to acting. Naturally, this goes hand in hand with her growing desire to move to the "West", where her dream of becoming a Hollywood star can come true. Her plan to travel to California begins when she remembers that her former teacher, Madame Orla, "has put her in touch with a theater school in London" (Alyan, 2021, p. 130). She decides to save money so that she can afford travel expenses and, most importantly, "be closer to California" (Alyan, 2021, p. 130). She meets Tarek Haddad, the theater director who has been to New York, with whom she becomes a close friend. In one of their conversations, he asks her: "Why on earth would you want to go to America?" and further comments: "They will cast you an exotic woman, a terrorist. Here you get to play everything" (Alyan, 2021, p. 132). Mazna simply replies: "That's because there is no competition", but he replies: "They won't even see you there" (Alyan, 2021, p. 132). Their dialogue implies Mazna's oblivion to the other image of America as she does not believe what Tarek says. Furthermore, it shows her unquestionable belief in the opportunities America offers for immigrants. She stands in for the Arabs of the twentieth century who built and embraced a romanticized picture of the "West" at that time. She has become more convinced that America is the only place where she can achieve her dream. She appears to carry this dream with her to the extent that she imagines herself returning from California "transformed . . . , a few years older and triumphant" (Alyan, 2021, p. 141); a wishful thinking that never materializes.

As a young Arab girl, Mazna is obsessed with her imaginative version of her future life in America. Such recourse to imagination can affect people's perception of the world as they live in their own imaginative realms (Shalabi & Khoury, 2022). Mazna seems to be certain that her perfect life cannot be lived in her country, but in the United States where she aspires to be a well-known actress. This is evident when she, Idris, and Zakaria, the Palestinian young man with whom she falls in love with and later is killed, play a game in which each one stands in front of a camera and makes a wish. When it is her turn, she subconsciously envisions her future with Zakaria in America as "an actress, successful, Zakaria running his own restaurant in Los Angeles" (Alyan, 2021, p. 171). In another instance, as she and Zakaria discuss their affair and future plans, she confidently assures him that everything will be fine saying: "We'll move to London. We'll work and save money for America" and "you can apply for asylum" (Alyan, 2021, p. 192). Her confidence alludes to her inexperience as she thinks of a taken-for-granted success in the "West". This sureness is instigated by a long time of exposure to Western movies and, most importantly, her belief that her talent will not let her down in America. Her optimistic view of her future in the "West" makes her a prototype of Arabs in the twentieth century as they adopted and propagated a glamorized image of Western life. Furthermore, after the death of Zakaria, Idris persuades Mazna to marry him by breaking the news of his acceptance to a surgical-residency program in a university hospital in California. At this moment, he knows exactly what excites her and can drive her to accept his proposal. Speaking to her, he states: "We'll be in California. You can drive up to Los Angeles whenever you want. You'd be just a couple of hours from *Hollywood*. . . you could audition for movies. You'd become a star" (Alyan, 2021, p. 211, italics in original). His words imply that he is sure that Mazna will not relinquish such a golden opportunity to move to America since her poverty and the difficult political situation in her country are real barriers to her dreams. Thus, her acceptance of Idris' proposal can be mainly motivated by her desire to live her dream in California.

The second phase of Mazna's life begins in 1978 when she arrives with Idris in America. It is the time when her fantasy collides with reality. She is now married to a medicine student and lives in a small, shabby apartment that the university allocates to its international students. Henceforth, Mazna gradually begins to realize that real life in America mismatches her imagined promising life. Idris is a student who can barely make ends meet although he descends from a Lebanese wealthy family. The fact that "Wealthy in Lebanon, wasn't wealthy" (Alyan, 2021, p. 311) in America shocks Mazna as she has never expected to lead such a life in California. However, her meeting with Cal, the head of Film Studies at the university where her husband is a student, marks the begging of her journey to demystify her preconceived notions about Hollywood. The first time Mazna stands before a camera happens when Cal nominates her for a role in one of his student's film projects. She enthusiastically prepares herself for the audition and drives to the location. She appears to be upset when Pen, the director, informs her that she would be playing the part of a broken woman; nonetheless, she accepts it. Although she is sure that her performance is not that good, Pen "unconvincingly" (Alyan, 2021, p. 325) praises her. Pen's attitude makes Mazna pretty sure that "Cal had something to do with it" (Alyan, 2021, p. 325) since she knows that she has not done well.

After many attempts, Mazna takes minor parts that are "always ethnic, often a line or two . . . , commercial roles for hijabis or two-liners in movies with terrorist plots" (Alyan, 2021, p. 325). This is the time when her expectations collide with reality. Her experience exactly reflects what Jack Shaheen illustrates about the representation of Arabs in the American TV during the 70s and 80s of the twentieth century as he states that "television tends to perpetuate four basic myths about Arabs [one of which is that] they revel in acts of terrorism" (Shaheen, 1984, p. 4). Her aspirations to be a star evaporate when she realizes that Hollywood welcomes her only as an extra whose complexion and identity serve the purpose of stereotyping Arabs as terrorists and backward hijabis. It is the truth that she, like many other Arabs, has always been unaware of. She cannot have a major role since she is "too dark for American parts" (Shaheen, 1984, p. 363). Furthermore, as the agent reminds her, she is given these stigmatized roles as "a favor to Cal" (Shaheen, 1984, p. 363), not because of her talent. Such a reminder implies that Mazna is likewise unaware of the distinction between performing on the stage of a theater and acting for the big screen. She might be a talented stage actor, but not a movie

one. Moreover, the audience she is performing for is different; she is celebrated in Syria as a gifted stage actor, but obscured in America.

Mazna's last hope to fulfill her dream is revived when she does the audition for the part of a heart-broken Arab; another stereotype of Arab women in Hollywood who are always deemed persecuted by their Arab male partners. In his book *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* (2009), Shaheen underlines such a stereotype as he states that "[i]n countless films . . . Arabs are brute murderers, sleazy rapists, religious fanatics, oil-rich dimwits, and abusers of women" (p. 8). The agent promises her that the producer will call soon, and she has to be alerted near the phone. Without telling Idris, she decides to abort her child since pregnancy may be a challenge for an actress. Her obsession with the mysterious yet-to-come surely drives her to sacrifice her maternal affection. However, her decision to miscarry the child is not purely hers. It is instigated by her reading of the biographies of Hollywood actresses who repeatedly had abortions since pregnancy is a challenge for them. One of these actresses is Ava Gardner who "had probably had a couple of abortions" (Gardner, 2013, p. 214). Nonetheless, her trauma reaches its peak when Idris informs her that the producers "went with someone else" (Gardner, 2013, p. 370). Thus, Mazna represents the Arab self who has adopted an enchanted image of the "West" and never thought of what the reality is. Via cinema and TV, she has always lived in an imaginative world in which beautiful young women live a completely different life from hers.

Mazna's failure to achieve the "American Dream" parallels Idris' success as a cardiologist. The couple travels to America with different plans, aspirations, and expectations. Unlike Mazna, Idris represents the wealthy Arabs who can gain access to proper education and enjoy a prosperous life in their natal country. He is satisfied with his status as a medicine student at the American University and considers applying for "a few residencies at hospitals in the United States" (Alyan, 2021, p. 147) as a luxury or a second option. He clearly declares to his friends that he "won't go, of course" for "[his] mother would be devastated, and my life is here" (Alyan, 2021, p. 147). As one of his audience, Mazna feels confused and asks him: "So why apply?", "I don't know, . . . [m]aybe I wanted to see if I'd get in?", he replies (Alyan, 2021, p. 148). Idris' attitude implies his lack of interest in starting a new life in America since he has a flourishing one in Lebanon. Additionally, it reveals that he has no interest in or aspirations to resettle in the "West". This is opposite to Mazna's insatiable desire to move to America because she believes that her dream will only come true if she leaves Syria. Moreover, unlike Idris, she has already embraced great expectations about the "West" and adopted the inherited 'myth of the West'.

Unlike what Mazna has anticipated, she and Idris being their life in California in a small apartment with a little income that barely "covers their food and maybe a restaurant meal or two" (Alyan, 2021, p. 311). Thus, contrary to her expectations, she is disappointed with such a reality since she believes she is now stuck in a labyrinth of misery; a life that offers and will offer her nothing. Conversely, Idris is "more cheerful about it, sheltered with his lab coat that has his name stitched onto it. He is in his new life" (Alyan, 2021, p. 311). His busy life in America changes his way of thinking. He is now more attached to the "American Dream". His first-hand experience of American life makes him turn a blind eye to returning to Beirut as he tells Mazna that "Beirut feels dead. Doesn't it?" (Alyan, 2021, p. 313). Such an experience influences him to adopt a new perspective on his future. He finds himself gradually fulfilling the "American Dream" as "[h]e is in America and he believes in it, believes his wife will become a star, that the hospital will support him. That they will have a long, good life here" (Alyan, 2021, p. 313). All of his expectations come true but for the one involving his wife.

With the passage of time, the narrative reveals that Idris could achieve the "American Dream" as he and Mazna "finally . . . have their own money coming in. Real money. Unattached money. Idris has been accepted to the cardiothoracic-surgery residency at the hospital at a salary twice his current stipend. Mazna nearly cried when he told her the number. They could move into a new apartment, send Ava to a better preschool" (Alyan, 2021, p. 338). His outstanding success is a major reason for his determination to continue the rest of his life in California. Mazna, however, comes to detest her life at the same time because of her failure in and disappointment with America.

### III. JAMAL MAHJOUB'S *THE FUGITIVES*: AMERICAN UNDER THE LENS OF A TRAVELER

Jamal Mahjoub's *The Fugitives* (2021) traces the journey of the Kamanga Kings, a Sudanese music band who are invited to play in the United States. Rushdy, the son of the ceased founder of the band and the protagonist of the novel is eager to revive the Kamanga Kings and travel to the United States. In a first-person point of view, Mahjoub explores the Sudanese individuals' dreams, aspirations, ambitions, and infatuation with the US. What matters in the novel are aspirations of the Sudanese who are keen to travel to the country of freedom and escape a turbulent country in which dreams have no place. In this regard, Emmanuel Omodeinde agrees that "[w]hilst Rushdy struggled with his personal integrity, reconciling the legacy of his father and the reputation of his country, the book's most poignant examples were to be found in its other characters" (Omodeinde, 2022). We argue that through Rusdy's eyes, Mahjoub draws two images of the United States. The first image is that of a country of safety, freedom, democracy, and opportunities. The second one is the image of the United States as a place where danger is also present and in which Arabs are stereotyped as opportunist asylum seekers and terrorists. This duality of portrayal, we contend, indicates that Mahjoub captures a panoramic picture of the "West" through which the reader can perceive both the dark and bright sides of American life.

El-Enany denotes that some accounts of Arab intellectuals of the previous centuries contained "self-flagellation coupled with the apotheosis of the other" (El-Enany, 2006, p. 146). This act of self-contempt was due to their belief that

Western culture was way more advanced in comparison with theirs. It was also the result of Arabs' disillusionment with their regimes and the consecutive war defeats the Arab world witnessed (see also Abu Amerih, 2022a). However, the Self in contemporary Anglophone diasporic Arab literature does not practice such an act. In *The Fugitive*, Mahjoub presents what can be called "self-criticism" rather than "self-flagellation". Through Rushdy's narrative and experience, Mahjoub implicitly condemns the Sudanese regimes and governments' policies and, at the same time, extols the Sudanese individual, that is, the dysfunctionality of the community is its government's fault, not the individuals'. Accordingly, the success of Rushdy and his band in the USA suggests that Arab individuals have the potential to make great achievements if they are properly sponsored or supported by their governments.

Mahjoub's self-criticism is apparent when Rushdy reflects on how the Sudanese government is reluctant to financially support the band's trip. Rushdy mentions how "lethargic civil servants" (Mahjoub, 2021, p. 78) are hesitant to help the public for the lack of censorship which leads to different forms of corruption. In this context, Yassin Bashir Hamid et al. affirm that Sudan "is classified among the poorest and most corrupted countries in the world" (Hamid et al., 2018, p. 145). Rushdy's statement also complies with Omer Hashim Ismail's remark that "cases of corruption have become one of the main features of the society; corrupt actions have become a common practice in government offices in Sudan" (Ismail, 2011, p. 44). What matters for these corrupt officials is not the welfare of the country's people, but their own personal interests.

After all, the government fails to support the band financially which leaves them with no choice but to accept Suleiman Gandoury's, a Sudanese businessman, offer to sponsor their trip to America. In their first meeting, Gandoury assures the band that supporting them is an honor and he "seek[s] no reward" (Mahjoub, 2021, p. 87). However, he later proves to be an opportunist as he asks the band to make a tour across the States so that he can gain money. Gandoury represents those connected to wealthy Sudanese who are part of the Sudanese corruption system. Conversing with Rushdy about the possibility of his return to Sudan, Gandoury says: "The fact is I can't go home. I'm too close to the men who have been in power all those years, and their time is up" (Mahjoub, 2021, p. 263). He is now determined not to go back since those who he used to have common interests with are no longer in their positions. Hence, Gandoury represents the Sudanese wealthy elite who can buy political immunity and security with money. A recent example of such people is Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemdeti), the leader of Rapid Support forces, who according to BBC News has been expected to run the country since "By the time Mr. Bashir was ousted in April, Hemedti was one of the richest men in Sudan - probably with more ready cash than any other politician" (Sudan Crisis, 2019).

Rushdy's experience as a teacher insinuates that the teaching profession in Sudan is no longer an option for educated individuals since teachers receive low salaries and students lack motivation (Elsuuni, 2015). Thus, he has become a part of the Sudanese community in which the quality of education is constantly deteriorating, and people like him can never gain access to a prosperous future. Moreover, doing what he is eligible for, that is teaching, can add nothing to him in a country plagued with corruption and lacks the proper infrastructure as he notes that "This was home. Everything we had known for as long as either of us could remember. The dusty streets, the flooding water, the crumbling houses. I couldn't say that I was unhappy about living there. It was all I had ever known, but I also knew that it had its limitations" (Mahjoub, 2021, pp. 38-39). His statement clearly evinces his awareness that his country can offer him some things, which seem to be nothing in comparison with what other countries offer. However, other essential matters are still beyond its reach.

Because of the depressing living conditions Rushdy and his band experience in their home country, they view the invitation they receive as an unmissable opportunity to travel to America, the dreamland. This is what Hisham, Rushdy's best friend and companion, tells him when the former knows about the letter; he says: "This is it, our one chance, our only chance. The best chance we will ever have. The chance to start a new life in America" (Mahjoub, 2021, p. 31). Hisham is the Arab young man whose embedded romanticized image of the "West" instinctively drives him to believe that America is the place where dreams are easily fulfilled. He, like many others, sees the invitation as his savior that helps him get out of the hell of his country and puts him in the "heaven" of America. He tells Rushdy about his plan to marry Zeina, a Sudanese-American singer who used to live in the same neighborhood, but went to America years ago, when they arrive in America. He is sure that he will be granted American citizenship once he is married to an American, and consequently, all doors of fame and fortune will be wide open before him. He is after "[a] common myth about immigration law", that is "marriage to a United States citizen will correct an immigrant's unauthorized status" while "[i]n reality, U.S. citizens have limited options to correct their spouses' status" (Mercer, 2007, p. 293). By believing so, he is a perfect example of those Arabs who have undeniably believed and adopted the notion that the first step to achieving the "American dream" is doing whatever it takes to marry an American woman even if it goes against one's traditions, ethics, or religion. Another example of such dreamers is Tiberuis, the Sudanese young man who has converted to Judaism and is about to marry a white woman ten years his senior. He confesses that his life has become better once her family and friends have taken care of him and "showered [him] with money" (Mahjoub, 2021, p. 278). Thus, he believes his conversion is a thank you for them and a gate to a new burden-free life.

Mahjoub draws a panoramic picture of America through the quest of Rushdy and his friends to find Gandoury and prove their honesty to the American government. This panoramic picture is different from the ambivalent attitude of Arab intellectuals in previous centuries. Unlike those Arab intellectuals whose "representations of the West evince a sense of dichotomy, of ambivalence, of simultaneous attraction and repulsion towards their object" (El-Enany, 2001, p.

8), Mahjoub's text draws an impartial, kaleidoscopic image of America through which the reader perceives what America really offer. It is an unbiased attempt to introduce the audience to the full image of the Occident to demonstrate that even in the "West", failure and success, safety and insecurity are possible.

Mahjoub highlights the advancement of America in comparison with Sudan. During the band's quest, Rushdy is impressed by the American infrastructure, highways, and other facilities; things that his country lacks. Subconsciously, he contrasts what he sees in America with his poor country:

I saw trees and buildings, rows of houses off in the distance. It was as if the whole country was in motion. All of it threaded together by the smooth black strip of tarmac held in place by white lines. We were totally unprepared for such a world. Where we came from the main road through the city was still known as Sharia al-Zalat, on account of the fact that it used to be the only asphalted road in town. Our roads came with added potholes and cracks to provide variety. Here, it felt as though we were zipping along a vast web. Around us, people moving north, south, east and west. Along the roadside there were places to eat, to sleep, to shop twenty-four hours a day. I was drowning, lost in absorbing what we were seeing. (Mahjoub, 2021, pp. 184-185)

His reflection illustrates his enchantment with the developed American life. The place is totally different and new for people like him. It is like a fairyland that he has never imagined. It is the first time for him, as well as his band, to have a first-hand experience of America that "All [they] knew about. . . comes from films" (Mahjoub, 2021, p. 185). He lives the dream of breathing the air of America, of personally experiencing the fanciful scenes he has seen on TV. It echoes the first time he opens his eyes to see what real America is when he is on his way to the hotel from the airport. Speaking to himself, he admits: "It looked like the America I knew from television, but it was different somehow. The people, their clothes, big thick coats that turned them into unrecognisable creatures, and the signs everywhere telling you where to go and what to do. It all looked strange. . . I saw wide open tracts of forest. There was a gentle sprinkling of white across the landscape and a golden blade of sunlight arched back sharply from a river" (Mahjoub, 2021, p. 112). America sounds like a wonderland for a Sudanese from the desert.

By sending the invitation letter to the late Kamanga Kings, America becomes the proper place in which the Kings can be revived. It is America that appreciates the band's long history of playing music and is keen to let the world know it. Before traveling to America and performing at Kennedy Center, Rushdy has been an obscure teacher of English who lives in a labyrinth of poverty and monotonous life while, following the performance on the Kennedy Center stage and audience's applause, he enthusiastically notes: "People we passed along the way nodded and greeted me. Suddenly I was a celebrity" (Mahjoub, 2021, p. 148). At this moment of contrasting his miserable past with his glorious present, he confesses: "I had been thinking of my life a couple of months ago. The misery of my days in school seem to have taken place on a distant planet far away on another galaxy" (Mahjoub, 2021, p. 148). His statements substantiate the notion that his home country could not offer him what he, like many others alike, has always dreamt of while America could. Almost at the end of his story, Rushdy expresses his gratitude to America stating: "We were lost and America helped us find ourselves" (Mahjoub, 2021, p. 330). Their performance in America has been the gate to fame and success.

Mahjoub completes the image of America by underlining the strict American policies towards immigrants and refugees. This is salient when Rushdy and his band are suspected to be asylum seekers and interrogated by the FBI and ICE. The agent who investigates the case informs the group that a phone call has been received reporting that "a certain visiting ensemble invited to play at the Kennedy Center tonight was planning to seek political asylum in the United States" (Mahjoub, 2021, p. 164). It is not a surprise for the band as Wad Mazaj, a member of the band, states: "these people think that everyone in the world dreams only of becoming Americans" (Mahjoub, 2021, p. 166). His remark denotes that the American government is certain that people all over the world seek American citizenship for the privileges it offers. Accordingly, in the United States, individuals like Rushdy and his companions who are from Third-World nations are immediately regarded as asylum seekers. Thus, even though Rushdy and his band are officially invited to perform at the Kennedy Center, they are viewed as immigrants, travelers, and refugees who are labeled as opportunists who endanger the economic and social well-being of the United States.

Furthermore, Mahjoub stresses the role of American media in stereotyping Arab immigrants/refugees. While Rushdy and his group are after Gandoury, who exploits them and takes all of their money, to prove their good intention and innocence, they watch a news report on the screen at the restaurant where they have a break. The news reporter asks a Senator: "Do you believe these people constitute a threat? I'm afraid we have no choice but to assume that to be the case" (Mahjoub, 2021, p. 215), the Senator replies. His reply clearly categorizes them as a group of criminals instead of artists. The Senator's reply accords with the immigration policies of Donald Trump's administration as it imposed strict restrictions to reduce the number of immigrants to America. To justify the imposition of these restrictions, American media has played a major role in framing Arab immigrants as a threat to the United States as Aditi Bhatia and Christopher J. Jenks note that "conservative media negatively represents refugees as a dangerous Other in a fairly dichotomous narrative, which transforms these individuals into one dimensional beings (e.g. monsters and statistics) that threaten the American way of life" (Bahtia & Jenks, 2018, p. 16).

This incident also raises issues related to how refugees and immigrants are portrayed in the media. Due to media portrayal (see e.g., Alkhawaja et al., 2020), Rushdy and his band are identified as terrorists by the public. This is exactly what happens when Rushdy is at a diner and hears someone telling others: "They're here! I'm telling you. All of them. The terrorists. Which ones? The ones on television, of course" (Mahjoub, 2021, p. 254). In this regard, Abdulrahman

Elsamni attributes the misperception of Arab immigrants/refugees in the “West” to “the negative frames of Arabs and Muslims disseminated by the media [which] help sustain a set of negative perceptions and aggressive attitudes toward these groups in the West” (Elsamni, 2016, p. 2). Therefore, American media has turned a group of African musicians into a bunch of fugitives looking for a way out of their trouble.

Like any other country around the world, American life has dark as well as bright sides. It is a country in which one can simultaneously lead a luxurious life and worry about his safety. It could be the nation of liberty and democracy, but it is also tainted with corruption and insecurity. Rushdy and his fellows unveil the less-alluring image of America while on their quest to find AlKanary, the old female singer who suddenly disappears. As he is looking for her, Rushdy enters a menacing place that is:

Hemmed in by a chain-link fence and flanked on both sides by burnt out buildings, the broken concrete was crisscrossed by weeds, twisted wire and abandoned furniture; a charred sofa, a refrigerator, a smashed television. It looked like a war had played out here not so long ago. As we stood there trying to decide what to do a car rolled slowly by along the street, the air shuddering to the heavy bass beat. Three men inside studied us as they cruised slowly by. (Mahjoub, 2021, pp. 290-291)

His depiction of the place suggests how terrifying it is. Also, it proposes his shock to realize that such a place can ever exist in the glorious United States. From the ruins he observes, he guesses that there has been a war-like fighting that left the place in this mess. As they continue inspecting the place, Rudy, who has recently met Rushdy and joined the band, notices graffiti painted on a wall and informs Rushdy that “this is gang territory. Not a good place to be in” (Mahjoub, 2021, p. 290). Rushdy continues describing the terrible condition of the area noting: “The street was dark and deserted. There were sirens in the distance. The houses around us looked as though they had been ripped apart. Windows were covered with plywood sheets that in turn had been painted over with graffiti messages. It was hard to believe anyone actually lived here (Mahjoub, 2021, p. 290). His insight exposes the reader to an alternate aspect of life in America. He has been fascinated with the advanced kind of life America offers, and now he is taken aback by the urban spaces which gangs mark as their dens. Rushdy’s observation of the gang is not meant to distort the image of America but to project a complete picture of American life. Regarding gangs in the United States, according to Susan A. Phillips, they are “small-scale social groups associated with criminal behavior, violence, and drug dealing” and they use graffiti “to define neighborhood space, to create lists of members, to signal affiliation, identity, enmity or alliance with other individuals or groups, and to create memorials” (Phillips, 2016, p. 48). This is to substantiate that the romanticized image of America remains an incomplete piece or half the truth about the kind of life an immigrant/refugee may encounter or lead.

For Arabs, Western politics is associated with democracy, honesty, and integrity while its Arab counterpart is tainted with corruption, abjection, and dishonesty. The Sudanese dystopia which is tainted with corruption, unemployment, deteriorated infrastructure, and lack of opportunities always drives individuals to think of the Western “utopia” in which they find all means of prosperity. It is exactly what Rushdy complains about as he speaks with Waldo, the American who takes the band in his van to pursue Gandoury, about the kind of life in Sudan, he remarks: “Where I come from, Waldo, politics is a mess. Politicians are corrupt. They care only about making themselves rich. Nobody cares about the common people” (Mahjoub, 2021, p. 187). Rushdy bitterly admits such a truth for his embedded belief that America is surely the country that offers its people what Sudan fails to. Nevertheless, and opposite to Rushdy’s, as well as Arabs’, expectations, Waldo replies: “It’s the same here. The big corporations fund the politicians so that once they get into congress they can change the laws to suit their friends. We’re so dumb we can’t see what they’re doing. Our current president claims to be on the side of the working man, but he’s basically only helping his rich friends” (Mahjoub, 2021, p. 187). He refers to the former president Donald Trump who according to Ryan Zamarripa and Seth Hanlon has broken the promises he gave to the American working class, and “[i]n virtually every policy sphere, his administration has favored powerful corporations and the wealthy at the expense of middle- and working-class Americans” (Zamarripa & Hanlon, 2020). As an American, Waldo’s words affirm that America is like any other country on Earth. He says this to remind Rushdy, and the reader, that corruption has no nationality, and as it is present in Sudan, it can be simply found in America.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The study has illustrated that contemporary Anglophone diasporic Arab writers have established an “Occidental discourse” through which the Occident is objectively represented to the audience. Their discourse is different from that of Arab writers from previous centuries as they do not call for emulation or adoption of Western culture. Through their narratives, Anglophone diasporic Arab writers paint nuanced picture of what the Occident is to deglamorize its idealized image Arabs have perpetuated for centuries. Their representation is impartial and valid for what they depict is based on their personal first-hand experiences of the Occident as they are settlers and, most of the time, citizens of the countries that contextualize their narratives. Accordingly, there is a pressing need for Occidentalism to fill the gap between Arabs’ great expectations and fancies about the Occident and reality. Also, the exploration of Mahjoub’s and Alyan’s novels has substantiated that Occidentalism cannot be defined as “Orientalism in reverse” for it does not entail a distortion or misrepresentation of the “Other”. It is then an objective representation of the Occident established by Arab intellectuals who have first-hand experiences of the West, not as travelers, but citizens.

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