Beyond Tokenism: A Study of Arab-American Muslim Identity, Belonging, and Social Dynamics in *The Other Americans and Between Two Moons*

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines Arab American Muslim women's identities, belonging, and social dynamics in Laila Lalami's *The Other Americans* (2019) and Aisha Abdel Gawad's *Between Two Moons* (2023). The analysis addresses a significant gap in current scholarship: the insufficient exploration of how these novels avoid tokenism by providing complex and authentic representations of Arab American Muslim women. This paper uses symbolic inclusion to explore how cultural heritage, assimilation, and societal integration shape the protagonists' identities. The methodology of textual analysis focuses on the extent to which the two novelists resist the superficial inclusion of marginalized characters, offering narratives where characters are both "seen" and "othered," challenging stereotypes and advocating for genuine inclusion within diasporic narratives. The key findings indicate that: (1) both novels depict Arab American Muslim women with depth, showcasing their struggles and resilience in navigating complex cultural and social landscapes; (2) the narratives challenge tokenism by portraying characters' internal conflicts and multifaceted identities rather than reducing them to mere cultural markers; and (3) the novels highlight the protagonists' agency in asserting their identities, countering the stereotypical portrayals often found in mainstream media. The study implies that Arab-American narratives can effectively foster genuine inclusion and understanding of diverse identities within diasporic narratives.

Keywords: Arab-American identity, social dynamics, symbolic inclusion, tokenism, representation

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Introduction

Arab-American literature has emerged as a vital area of study that critically examines issues of identity, cultural negotiation, and the multifaceted challenges encountered by women in the diaspora. Authors like Diana Abu-Jaber and Mohja Kahf employ hybrid narrative structures to examine the complex situation of Arab-American Muslim women, aptly merging Western and Eastern storytelling traditions (Michael, 2011; Berrebbah, 2020). Moreover, their works address pressing and sensitive topics, such as the structures of patriarchy, the nuances of women's rights within an Islamic framework, and the pervasive issue of domestic violence. These narratives not only challenge existing stereotypes but also navigate the complex intersections of secular and Islamic feminist paradigms, offering a rich and nuanced exploration of these social dynamics (Berrebbah, 2021; Berrebbah, 2020). Arab-American literature has developed throughout the 20th and 21st centuries to address pressing issues of race, ethnicity, politics, and transnationalism. Although initially marginalized within ethnic studies, recent scholarship has begun to carve out a place for Arab-American literature within the "ethnic borderland," promoting interethnic connections and solidarities (Fadda-Conrey, 2006).

This study seeks to interrogate the portrayal of Arab-American experiences in two significant narratives: Laila Lalami's *The Other Americans* (2019) and Aisha Abdel Gawad's *Between Two Moons* (2023). The discussion explores the tokenistic and superficial representations commonly found in mainstream narratives. Tokenism, defined as the superficial inclusion of minorities to create an illusion of diversity without engaging with their authentic experiences, perpetuates harmful stereotypes and oversimplifies complex identities (Du Datta & Bhardwaj, 2024; Childress et al., 2024). This analysis addresses the prevalence of tokenism within narratives surrounding Arab-American Muslim women, thereby highlighting the critical need for symbolic inclusion to ensure the authentic representation of the diverse identities and experiences within this demographic.

Literature review

Laila Lalami's *The Other Americans* (2019) and Aisha Abdel Gawad's *Between Two Moons* (2023) are engaging novels that explore the intricacies of Arab-American Muslim women's encounters with prejudice. Past studies of these two works of fiction explore numerous themes, as this section will illustrate. Their narrative techniques offer nuanced

portrayals of human experience, inviting readers to reflect on the universal themes of longing, resilience, and the transformative power of memory within the context of diasporic life (Alsultany, 2012; Dwivedi, 2023). *The Other Americans* (Lalami, 2019*)* and *Between Two Moons* (Abdel Gawad, 2023) are two compelling narratives that explore the struggles of Arab-American Muslim women facing discrimination, highlighting their ongoing struggle for social justice and the complexities of maintaining cultural identity amidst societal prejudice (Abu-Lughod, 2002; El Boubekri, 2022; Boutine & Abu Amrieh, 2023). Both *The Other Americans* and *Between Two Moons* contribute significantly to contemporary Arab-American literature by presenting authentic and nuanced portrayals of Arab-American identity and belonging (Said, 1978; Khrebtan-Hörhager, 2016).

Laila Lalami's *The Other Americans* (2019) and Aisha Abdel Gawad*'s Between Two Moons* (2023) critically address the widespread stereotypes about Muslims and American Muslims. Both authors use characterizations that highlight Islamic values such as perseverance, compassion, and innovation to counter negative narratives of savagery and backwardness (Kirkus Reviews, 2019; Edouihri, 2021; Febrina, 2022). These novels reject superficial representations, offering nuanced depictions of Arab-American lives and challenging exclusionary perceptions of belonging within the US (Boutine & Abu Amrieh, 2023; El Boubekri, 2022). *The Other Americans* by Lalami (2019) specifically critiques post-9/11 stereotypes and the concept of "Othering" by highlighting the peaceful tenets of Islam while contrasting them with biased Orientalist views (El Boubekri, 2022). Moreover, Lalami's work intricately explores the diasporic experience, weaving in the complexities of belonging and the challenges of Arab American muslim women in foreign lands, while memory and storytelling become potent tools for characters to reclaim their personal histories, assert agency, and demonstrate resilience amidst displacement and cultural dislocation (Edouihri, 2021; Boutine & Abu Amrieh, 2023: El Boubekri, 2022). Through these narrative strategies, the novels collectively work to undermine anti-Muslim racism and foster a more complex and empathetic understanding of the Muslim identity in America.

Similarly, *Between Two Moons* (Abdel Gawad, 2023) tackles the integration of Muslim minorities within American society against a highly politicized backdrop. In this context, Abdel Gawad advocates for love and forgiveness as alternatives to violence and vendetta (Boutine & El Boubekri, 2022; Abu Amrieh, 2023). The novel explores themes of identification and surveillance, showcasing the resilience of marginalized characters

such as Amira and Lina (Febrina, 2022; Abdel Gawad, 2023; Pamungkas, 2023). Furthermore, both novels project the experiences of aging immigrants living far from their original homelands, illustrating how dislocation drives them into creative nostalgia as they attempt to recreate their lost surroundings. This thematic concern intricately connects aging, place, and nostalgia through sophisticated portrayals of diasporic life (Ali, 1992; Kumar & Sushil, 2022).

In addition, these two novels illustrate how dislocation profoundly impacts the memories of elderly immigrants, compelling them to reconstruct their past through reclaimed memories (Chaudhry, 2023). *Between Two Moons* (Abdel Gawad, 2023) primarily uses nostalgia as a vehicle for navigating aging in foreign lands, highlighting the enduring connection between memory, identity, and place within the diaspora (Maji, 2018; Elreedy et al., 2023). At the same time, these narratives move beyond mere resilience by critiquing the harsh realities of discrimination and Islamophobia, particularly in Lalami's *The Other Americans* (2019), which underscores the limitations of individual fortitude in the face of systemic bias (Febrina, 2022; Roy, 2022; El Mitry, 2023). Nevertheless, both novels counter reductionist portrayals of Arab Americans, offering nuanced and complex characters that resist mainstream stereotypes (Singh et al., 2023; Smith, 2018) and illuminating the necessity for genuine inclusion and understanding rather than symbolic gestures (Ghosh & Barber, 2021; Mugo & Puplampu, 2022).

Through their compelling characters and engaging narratives, these novels offer insightful explorations of social dynamics, advocating for genuine representation (Asmawati et al., 2023). Additionally, Lalami's work critiques superficial representations by emphasizing themes of love, forgiveness, and the struggle for integration amidst political tensions. At the same time, Abdel Gawad's narrative explores the intersections of multiple cultural identities and internal conflicts within diasporic characters. These novels reflect broader societal issues such as diversity, inclusion, and social justice, contributing to meaningful discussions on identity formation and cultural representation in literature. However, despite recent scholarly interest in cultural diversity, there remains a gap in academic studies addressing how these novels avoid the pitfalls of tokenism, where characters are included as Arab-Americans without any complexity. The authors of these narratives, Laila Lalami and Aisha Abdel Gawad, craft stories that highlight their characters' struggles with personal and cultural identity, particularly as they navigate spaces where they are both "seen" and "othered." These characters grapple with the complexities of balancing their Arab-American identities while confronting

societal expectations and stereotypes. This dynamic emphasizes the need for genuine inclusion and social justice within diasporic narratives.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This section delineates the theoretical framework and research approach employed in this study to analyze Arab-American Muslim narratives, with particular emphasis on the issues of symbolic inclusion and representation. The framework offers a critical lens for comprehending the duality of experiences and the intricacies of the representations of Arab American Muslim women (Said, 1978). Symbolic inclusion denotes a significant departure from superficial tokenism, serving as a mechanism for authentic representation and empowerment (Grant, 2017). In contrast to tokenism, which Stuart Hall (1997) characterizes as a superficial gesture that reinforces prevailing power structures by situating marginalized individuals within dominant frameworks without genuinely challenging them, symbolic inclusion aspires to engender authentic and nuanced representations. This approach integrates marginalized identities not as peripheral figures or clichéd stereotypes but as central characters possessing agency and complex narratives. The primary objective of symbolic inclusion is to cultivate genuine, multi-dimensional portrayals that resist tokenism. Hall (1997) posits that cultural members generate and disseminate "meaning" through "representation" (p. 15), underscoring that tokenism operates within dominant ideologies, reducing subaltern groups to mere symbols and perpetuating established power relations. Hall (1997) further observes that "stereotypes" simplify individuals to a limited set of fixed characteristics, thereby reinforcing the existing power dynamics (p. 257). He emphasizes that representation functions as a "site of struggle" (p. 25), wherein dominant groups uphold power hierarchies by controlling the depiction of identities. Hall argues that the essence of representation resides in its practice, suggesting that if meaning is generated through representation rather than being predetermined, the act of representation serves as a crucial arena for contesting power (p. 25). Consequently, symbolic inclusion becomes vital in challenging these dynamics and promoting more equitable representations.

Similarly, this mode of representation originates from the socialist critiques of commodification and hegemonic influence. Horkheimer and Adorno (2002), among others, urged in their analysis of the culture industry that it was dangerous how privileged cultural forces tended to flatten complex identities into simplistic, highly marketable caricatures serving better the interests of the dominant culture than any accurate

reflection of genuine lived realities. This concern was with the "culture industry," which "impresses the same stamp on everything" (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002, p. 95). To this end, symbolic inclusion challenges reductive thinking by promoting representations that reflect the diverse and multifaceted lived experiences of marginalized communities. This theoretical underpinning strongly aligns with the critical race theory, which includes the intersectionality of oppression (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 140). This theory acknowledges marginalization arising from overlapping factors like race, class, and gender, emphasizing the need for intersectionality in symbolic inclusion.

Edward Said's assertion that the relationship between the West and the East is characterized by power dynamics and complex hegemony illustrates how hegemonic narratives often reduce non-Western identities to simplistic stereotypes, highlighting the need for more inclusive portrayals (Said, 1978, p. 5). Similarly, Frantz Fanon's critique of being objectified through a Eurocentric lens underscores the dehumanizing effects of such representations, emphasizing the necessity for narratives that affirm agency and complexity (Fanon, 1952, p. 116). Homi Bhabha's notion of hybridity, which addresses the complexities and disruptions inherent in sites of discrimination and domination, further reinforces the importance of symbolic inclusion in capturing the fluid and intersectional identities of marginalized groups, such as Arab American Muslim women (Bhabha, 1994, p. 159). Collectively, these theories highlight the urgent need for narratives that resist reductive stereotypes, ensuring that marginalized characters are authentically represented and empowered within their cultural contexts.

Moreover, Said's critique of Orientalism provides a crucial framework for understanding the misrepresentation often found in tokenism. He articulates that the "Orient" has been largely constructed by Western narratives as a place filled with romance and exoticism, where the distinction between East and West serves as a form of power (Said, 1978, p. 1). This construction creates a homogenized and stereotypical image of the Arab and Muslim cultures, stripping them of their diversity and agency. In response, symbolic inclusion seeks to counter these misrepresentations by portraying these communities in their authentic richness and complexity, thereby fostering a more nuanced understanding of their identities.

Understanding the role of misrepresentation and the necessity for symbolic inclusion can be framed through W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of "double consciousness." He describes this phenomenon as the experience of viewing oneself through the lens of a prejudiced

society, which often leads to feelings of contempt and pity from others (Du Bois, 1903, p. 3). This dual perspective emphasizes the importance of self-representation that fosters self-respect and counters negative societal perceptions. Postcolonial theories reveal that representation is deeply entwined with power dynamics. Spivak critiques how dominant powers distort subaltern voices through "strategic essentialism" (Spivak, 1988, p. 93), while Bell Hooks advocates for a decolonized, counter-hegemonic perspective as central to Black liberation. Together, these arguments call for authentic representations that truly empower marginalized identities (Hooks, 1990, p. 251).

This section establishes a robust theoretical framework for analyzing Arab-American Muslim narratives, decisively prioritizing symbolic inclusion over tokenism. By integrating critical race theory, postcolonial thought, and socialist critiques of commodification, this approach elucidates how tokenism not only perpetuates detrimental stereotypes but also reinforces existing power imbalances. Key thinkers like Hall, Said, Fanon, Du Bois, and Hooks reveal representation as a site of struggle, with their works underscoring the need for nuanced, authentic portrayals that empower marginalized voices. This framework stresses that real inclusion goes beyond simple representation and requires deep, multifaceted stories that actively fight hegemonic forces and allow for self-determination. This shows how important authentic stories and agency are for people from marginalized communities. Ultimately, this framework establishes symbolic inclusion as a crucial tool for disrupting established hierarchies and fostering a more equitable and representative cultural landscape. Based on this theoretical foundation, the two selected novels are examined through comparative textual analysis and close reading in this article.

Discussion and Findings

Complex Portrayals of Arab American Muslim Women: Moving Beyond Tokenism Through Symbolic Inclusion

Both *The Other Americans* (2019) and *Between Two Moons* (2023) are significant literary works that reject tokenism in their portrayal of Arab-American characters, offering multi-dimensional representations that delve into the complexities of their inner lives. Authors Laila Lalami and Aisha Abdel Gawad each utilize unique strategies to achieve symbolic inclusion, confronting cultural oppression and affirming identity. Through their narratives, they provide a nuanced exploration of the Arab-Muslim-

American experience in the post-9/11 landscape, inviting readers to engage with the diverse and distinct journeys of these characters, thereby fostering a deeper understanding of their realities beyond simplistic stereotypes (Ghosh & Barber, 2021; El Boubekri, 2022). These novels actively contribute to the ongoing discourse surrounding representation and defy the reductive nature of tokenism, which persists in contemporary literature and media (Stroshine & Brandl, 2011; Lee, 2020). Unlike tokenism, which uses the superficial incorporation of marginalized characters as mere symbols, symbolic inclusion entails the authentic integration of identities within the plot and narrative. By utilizing symbolic inclusion and tokenism as a framework, this paper explores the extent to which Lalami and Abdel Gawad move beyond surface-level representations to critique the portrayal of Arab-American Muslim women, emphasizing their experiences of being both visible and unseen, included yet marginalized. Importantly, this nuanced approach underscores how these authors challenge reductive stereotypes and advocate for a more complex understanding of the multifaceted identities within the Arab-American community.

Lalami's *The Other Americans* (2019) actively resists tokenistic depictions, instead presenting protagonist Nora's deeply personal, cultural, and emotional life with complexity. As the novel opens, Nora's narrative is grounded in a specific, impactful moment: "My father was killed on a spring night four years ago while I sat in the corner booth of a new bistro in Oakland" (Lalami, 2019, p. 10). This opening scene highlights the theme of symbolic inclusion, integrating Nora's experiences with race, class, and belonging. Her father's death introduces invisible barriers that complicate questions of inclusion. Moreover, Lalami weaves Nora's cultural heritage into the story, challenging tokenism and capturing the complexity of marginalized identities. This approach rejects easy simplification and offers a fuller representation of Nora's lived experience, compelling readers to engage beyond superficial levels. Indeed, tokenism often flattens characters, reinforces social prejudices, and ultimately fails to address systemic injustices (Spivak, 1988; Bhabha, 1994; Hall, 1997). Instead, *The Other Americans* (Lalami, 2019) goes beyond superficial representations, rendering its characters, as Maryam reflects, simultaneously "seen" and "othered." This demonstrates the necessity for authentic and diverse depictions in literature that transcend superficial labels and promote a more profound understanding. As Maryam poignantly states:

> Time passed, yet I still found myself reaching for two glasses when I made
> mint tea in the morning, looking for my husband's socks when I folded

the laundry, or wanting him to hand me a fresh towel when I stepped out of the shower. These little moments were painful; they reminded me that I was no longer his wife, that I was his widow now, a state of being I was still trying to accept. (Lalami, 2019, p. 131)

Moreover, Laila Lalami's *The Other Americans* (2019) actively resists the tokenistic portrayals of Arab-American Muslim women, offering deeply nuanced characters like Maryam and Nora. Maryam, facing widowhood, is portrayed beyond simplistic stereotypes, with her struggles embedded in broader contexts of identity and belonging. As Said (1978) states, "The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences" (p. 1). This emphasizes the significance of understanding power dynamics to prevent misrepresentations of underrepresented populations. Said advocates highlighting the protagonist's culture and emotions rather than relying on stereotypes. Authors can combat historical misrepresentations and challenge supremacy by providing detailed and authentic representations. In this context, Lalami avoids tokenism by illustrating the complex tension between societal expectations and personal reality. As Maryam reflects: "But life has to be faced, even when it can't be accepted, and after I received a second phone call from the restaurant manager, asking me when we planned to reopen, by which he meant something else, of course—he meant that the staff had bills to pay and families to support—I realized I could no longer delay the inevitable." I had to go to work" (Lalami, 2019, p. 131). Her hardships are not reduced to cultural or religious tropes; instead, they are grounded in financial imperatives and individual fortitude, showcasing her autonomy as a proprietor and provider (Lamghari, 2024, p. 148). Similarly, Nora's character is deliberately multifaceted, reflecting the struggles of many Arab-American Muslim women. Nora articulates her desire to be seen as an individual:

I had never seen myself as an immigrant before. I had always been just me, born in California, raised in the Mojave Desert, and one hundred percent American. I wanted to be judged by what I made of myself, not by where my parents came from, not by the sound of my name, not by the color of my skin. (Lalami, 2019, p. 34)

This internal conflict, along with her assertion of being "one hundred percent American," is counterposed by societal assumptions about her identity, revealing the

tension between symbolic inclusion and tokenism (Du Bois, 1903; Said, 1978). Lalami further emphasizes this complexity through Nora's emotional landscape, using a powerful metaphor: "Under my headlights, I could see only twenty feet ahead. But the fog lifted at dawn, and by the time I reached the Mojave, the sun was out and the sky a brazen blue" (Lalami, 2019, p. 10). This journey from darkness to light embodies both Nora's struggles and a broader critique of how society reshapes individuals based on racial or ethnic identities, challenging monolithic narratives (Said, 1978; Febrina, 2022). Additionally, Lalami showcases Nora's complex relationships, mainly the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy about her sex life with her mother:

> For years, we had been operating under a Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy about my sex life, and our mutual violation of that agreement while I was home— she asked, I told—had given her yet another reason to be disappointed in me. Why couldn't I be more like Salma, she moaned, find myself a nice Muslim doctor or engineer, and marry him? (Lalami, 2019, p. 280)

Nora Guerraou underscores the complex dynamics of the muslim identity within Arab-American communities and the challenges of balancing traditional cultural expectations with modern life. Her feelings of being objectified are also powerfully portrayed:

> I couldn't shake the unwavering gaze at the cabin window. Whenever I tried to interpret the expression in Fierro's eyes, I couldn't decide whether it was disgust or desire, but both made me feel like I was nothing more than a body or even a commodity. (Lalami, 2019, p. 280)

In addition, Nora highlights her struggle against being reduced to a mere object. Du Bois, W.E.B. (1903) refers "the 'sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity'" (p. 3). Here, Du Bois highlights the internal conflict faced by Arab Americans, who navigate their identity through heritage and dominant culture, balancing traditional values with modern life. Finally, Nora's desire to be judged by her merits encapsulates Lalami's dedication to presenting her as a fully realized individual beyond cultural stereotypes: "I wanted to be judged by what I made of myself, not by where my parents came from" (Lalami, 2019, p. 109). As scholar Waleed Serhan (2024) observes, Lalami's narrative "resists the reduction of Arab Muslim women to static roles," emphasizing

the fluidity of their identities shaped by personal choices, exemplified by a character who "wore a headscarf because she wanted to, not because her husband asked her to. She had made that choice herself" (Lalami, 2019, p. 63).Through this nuanced portrayal, Lalami challenges tokenistic representations and advocates for a deeper understanding of Arab-American Muslim women (Said, 1978; Spivak, 1988).

Similarly, Aisha Abdel Gawad's *Between Two Moons* (2023) explores the lives of two young Arab-American Muslim women, Amira and Lina, in post-9/11 New York City, highlighting the complexities of symbolic inclusion and their shared struggles with societal pressures. Abdel Gawad illustrates how the character's Muslim identity leads to an increased awareness of police surveillance. The moment described involves a conversation between the narrator and Sami, where the narrator expresses an expectation of a defensive or embarrassed reaction due to the context of being watched by the police. The statement, "The police," followed by an explanation, "They watch what Muslims do online," signals a subtle yet powerful moment of realization about the pervasive surveillance of Muslims, especially in the aftermath of 9/11. Abdel Gawad narrates,

> I expected Sami to jump at the sound of my voice behind him. I expected him to be embarrassed or defensive. But he just said, 'Why?' […] 'The police,' I said, unsure if I was being played. 'They watch what Muslims do online. (Abdel Gawad, 2023, p. 107)

Here, Abdel Gawad reveals the disparity between symbolic inclusion and actual acceptance. Muslims in America after 9/11 may experience symbolic recognition in some spaces, but simultaneously, they are forced to bear constant surveillance and suspicion, which indicates that such inclusion is not genuine. They are "seen" in public places but are also "othered" and scrutinized based on their cultural identity. The fear and suspicion that mark the character's discovery that he is being followed by the police illustrate how the cosmetic inclusion under such circumstances leads to no acceptance in society. Rather, it emphasizes a level of alienation, where persons are identified through their identity and are suspected rather than being assimilated into the social structure (Chin & Levey, 2022).

The emotional burden of constant surveillance underscores the inadequacy of superficial inclusion, which fails to account for the textured realities of their lives. Moreover, when Faraj chastises Amira for her headscarf falling in public, he points to

her head and says, "You should be more careful next time. We're in public" (Abdel Gawad, 2023, p. 107). Amira apologizes, saying, "I am sorry." Faraj stands up, brushes his hands off his jeans, and replies, "I have to get going" (Abdel Gawad, 2023, p. 107). Abdel Gawad highlights how, even within marginalized communities, there are pressures to adhere to externally imposed notions of modesty. This reduces the hijab to a point of surveillance and control, thereby reinforcing tokenism. In addition, the differing perceptions of Amira and Lina further expose the limitations of superficial understanding. As Amira reflects;

> People were always saying that Lina was sneaky and untrustworthy. However, really, I was opaque and Lina was transparent. I grew up watching siblings who were born with a natural talent for self-destruction. I didn't have that. I was cautious by nature, defensive, withdrawn. (Abdel Gawad, 2023, p. 179)

Here, Lina's labeling as "sneaky" exemplifies tokenism, simplifying her identity into a stereotype, while Amira's self-perception as "opaque" stems from her struggle with visibility and her desire to escape societal control. The tension between symbolic inclusion and tokenism is further captured in Lina's declaration: "This is why I don't date Muslims," she grumbled. "Got to keep that shit separate" (Abdel Gawad, 2023, p. 130). This poignant moment reveals her resistance to the cultural pressures that essentialize her life experience, thereby reducing her identity to a mere representative one (Childress et al., 2024). At the same time, this statement highlights her yearning for authentic interaction, free from cultural judgment. These narratives demonstrate how, by focusing on the complex inner lives of Amira and Lina, Abdel Gawad avoids tokenism and promotes a richer understanding of the multifaceted lives of Arab-American Muslim women.

Moreover, Aisha Abdel Gawad's *Between Two Moons* (2023) skillfully employs symbolic inclusion to challenge the tokenistic representations of Arab-American Muslim women, presenting them as complex individuals navigating the societal pressures of post-9/11 America (Tănăsescu, 2023). The novel explores how Amira and Lina navigate their identities in a culture that perceives them as inherently "other." Amira's awareness of surveillance reveals the emotional strain experienced by Arab Muslims. Amira's sense of alienation and fear of being scrutinized is further illustrated when she expresses her uncertainty about those around her: "I can't tell who's an enemy. I can't tell if you're an

enemy" (Abdel Gawad, 2023, p. 265). This moment highlights the emotional toll that constant surveillance takes on Arab Muslims, showing how symbolic inclusion often fails to acknowledge their lived experiences and human complexities. In addition, Amira's sense of alienation is further highlighted when she states: "I wanted to be accepted, but how could I when all I saw were strangers, and even my own family didn't seem to understand me?" (Abdel Gawad, 2023, p. 155). This encapsulates her separation from mainstream society and her heritage, suggesting that authentic and rich depictions are crucial for capturing the depth of identity beyond tokenism.

Similarly, Lina's character illuminates the tension between tokenism and genuine representation. By stating, "This is why I don't date Muslims" (Abdel Gawad, 2023, p. 130), she expresses her desire to distance herself from cultural expectations, criticizing how tokenism reduces individuals to mere symbols rather than acknowledging their distinct identities. Therefore, Lina's struggle reveals how attempts to conform to societal norms can lead to alienation and a yearning for authenticity in a world that labels them superficially. While the characters' lives are intrinsically linked to their culture, Abdel Gawad avoids simplifying their experiences. Amira's contemplation of her hijab, "Every time I wore it, I felt the weight of my ancestors on my shoulders, but I also felt the judgment of strangers who saw me as just a headscarf" (Abdel Gawad, 2023, p. 178), captures the tension between heritage and societal perception. By showcasing Amira's psychological anguish, Abdel Gawad goes beyond tokenism, allowing readers to connect with her as a complex individual. Ultimately, the novel's use of symbolic inclusion demonstrates how Amira and Lina navigate their identities in a society that often views them as culturally distinct. Amira's awareness of surveillance highlights the emotional burden faced by Arab-American Muslims.

Both *The Other Americans* (Lalami, 2019) and *Between Two Moons* (Abdel Gawad, 2023) move beyond the tokenistic representations of Arab-American Muslim women, offering profound, complex articulations of their identities. These novels demonstrate how symbolic inclusion while aiming for authentic representation can paradoxically highlight societal prejudices. In *Between Two Moons* (Abdel Gawad, 2023), Amira's inner conflict exemplifies this, as her hijab automatically makes her "other," even in New York, a city known for its cultural diversity as "This bearded terrorist-looking guy and this hijabi terrorist-looking girl out on a date in their neighborhood. No one stared at us. It was New York" (Abdel Gawad, 2023, p. 118). It contrasts the characters' "terrorist-looking" appearance with their anonymity and acceptance in a multicultural space to challenge

stereotypes. Similarly, Lalami's portrayal of the generational conflict between Nora and Maryam in *The Other Americans* (2019) exposes cultural and ideological tensions within immigrant families: "Maryam's world was one of order and faith, where everything had its place, and deviations were not easily tolerated" (Lalami, 2019, p. 178). Both novels utilize multi-dimensional characters to resist simplistic narratives.

Furthermore, Abdel Gawad explores these complexities through Lina, who mockingly suggests that Faraj is ready to settle down with a "good Muslima": "He's totally your future husband," she says, "You said he's older, so he's probably tired of hooking up with white girls and ready to wife a good Muslima" (Abdel Gawad, 2023, p. 39). This interaction reveals the complex interplay between romantic pursuits and societal expectations, highlighting the ambivalence faced by Arab-American Muslim women (Said, 1978; Spivak, 1988). Lalami similarly uses symbolic inclusion to introduce Nora, whose life reflects the tension between identity and societal expectations: "At recess, the kids fanned out and gathered again in small groups—military kids, church kids, trailer-park kids, hippie kids—groups in which I knew no one and no one knew me" (Lalami, 2019, p. 25). This moment highlights Nora's early experience of being othered and her struggle to find belonging within societal structures (Fuleihan, 2022). Lalami critiques tokenism through Nora's artistic struggles, as society pigeonholes her based on her ethnicity despite her talent as a composer. This is evident when she is urged to abandon distractions and fully commit to her art: "If you're going to do something as crazy as writing music, you might as well commit to it. Get rid of the diner and go write the best goddamn music you can." (Lalami, 2019, p. 265). This moment illustrates her emotional battle in a society that acknowledges her heritage but often overlooks her individuality as an artist, pressuring her to navigate between personal ambition and external expectations. Meanwhile, Lina's choice to socialize with "the good Muslim girls" at "the Starbucks on 3rd instead of drinking with the Mexicans in Sunset Park" (Abdel Gawad, 2023, p. 14) highlights the pressures of cultural expectations and the struggle to balance cultural loyalty and personal freedom. This dichotomy reveals how the portrayals of Arab-American Muslim women can be reduced to simplistic choices that fail to encompass their complex identities.

In sum, Lalami's *The Other Americans* (2019) and Abdel Gawad's *Between Two Moons* (2023) effectively combat tokenism by employing symbolic inclusion to depict the nuanced experiences of Arab-American Muslim women in post-9/11 America. These novels advance beyond superficial representations by developing multi-dimensional

characters who navigate cultural oppression and individual challenges, thereby fostering empathy and understanding. Lalami concentrates on the exploration of internal emotional landscapes, while Abdel Gawad emphasizes the ramifications of the social gaze; nevertheless, both authors highlight the agency and resilience of their protagonists. Ultimately, these works contribute to the essential discourse surrounding authentic representation, advocating for complex narratives that mirror the richness and intricacies of marginalized identities. They encourage readers to engage with the multifaceted realities of the Arab-Muslim-American experience.

Symbolic Inclusion as a Tool for Authentic Representation in *The Other Americans* (2019) and *Between Two Moons* (2023)

Symbolic inclusion provides a theoretical framework for examining the depth and authenticity of the portrayal of Arab Muslim American women in Laila Lalami's *The Other Americans* (2019) and Aisha Abdel Gawad's *Between Two Moons* (2023). Moreover, symbolic inclusion prioritizes the meaningful depiction of marginalized communities beyond mere visibility (Tănăsescu, 2023). It comprehensively portrays these individuals while acknowledging their identities, challenges, and successes within their social environments. In contrast, tokenism frequently leads to superficial or stereotypical portrayals that do not question prevailing narratives (Serhan, 2024). Both Lalami and Abdel Gawad employ symbolic inclusion to construct narratives that recognize the complex experiences of Arab Muslim American women, integrating their stories into broader social and cultural contexts.

Lalami illustrates this complexity through Jeremy's introspection, where he says: "I'd tell myself, If you fall asleep now, you could still get four hours of sleep, or three hours, or two" (Lalami, 2019, p. 14). Despite his insomnia, Jeremy struggles for control and sincerity. His attempt to rationalize his way to sleep demonstrates a desire to manage his unpredictable condition. This inner dialogue represents the battle for honest representation and the difficulty of maintaining sincerity under adversity. Edward Said (1978) posits, "The relationship between the Occident and the Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony" (p. 5). By examining subtle power structures and how characters' actions, thoughts, and feelings are shaped by their perceptions, Said provides a lens through which writers can depict the gaze of the dominant culture. The cultural landscape of the novel should reflect or challenge hegemony, as seen in characters seeking media normalcy. Lalami notes Maryam's efforts

to connect with her new environment when she states, "I was trying to stay awake, so I switched on the radio and looked for Claudia Corbett's show on KDGL" (Lalami, 2019, p. 37). This moment illustrates Maryam's desire for connection and normalcy in a new culture. Listening to popular radio shows offers her emotional and cultural support, symbolically aiding her integration into society while contrasting her traditional habits with new cultural experiences. Authentic inclusion and complex, empowering representations of Arab American Muslim women challenge the culture industry's focus on profit and stereotypical narratives (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002; Abu-Lughod, 2002).

In addition, Laila Lalami masterfully employs symbolic inclusion in *The Other Americans* (1982) to challenge the shallow representations of Arab-American Muslim women often found in conventional narratives. Beyond simple tokenism, Lalami uses Nora's character to explore the interconnections of gender, ethnicity, and social class, presenting a fully developed figure battling individual and collective issues. As Lalami illustrates through Nora's perspective, "Nora felt the weight of her father's expectations and her ambitions pulling her in opposite directions, each demanding a sacrifice she was not sure she was ready to make" (Lalami, 2019, p. 213). This internal conflict mirrors the Arab-American experience, where group identification frequently supersedes individual objectives, highlighting the struggle to balance personal desires with familial obligations (Dwivedi, 2023). Lalami embeds Nora's narrative within a broader socio-political context, underscoring her encounters with prejudice and discrimination. Through symbolic inclusion, Lalami critiques individual biases and the structural prejudices that Arab-American Muslim women confront (French et al., 2013). She emphasizes how societal perceptions shape Nora's artistic trajectory, noting, "She had learned early on that her name, her appearance, the cadence of her speech—none of it fit the image of what an artist was supposed to be in America. She was too much of a foreigner and an 'other'" (Lalami, 2019, p. 147). This highlights the strong connection between Nora's identity and her sense of belonging—or lack thereof—in American culture.

By exploring these complexities, Lalami provides a nuanced and authentic portrayal of Arab-American Muslim women that transcends superficiality. The forced representation of Nora and Sonya in the Christmas play, despite their protests, as "Magi," with "flowing white scarves covering our long hair and robes dissimulating our budding breasts and hips" (Lalami, 2019, p. 101), exemplifies the novel's critique of superficial inclusion. Although seemingly inclusive, it reveals how Muslim women are often portrayed in broad or superficial terms in public and cultural spaces, lacking respect for their identities (Johnson,

2014). This scene underscores how such inclusions often fail to acknowledge the authentic experiences of marginalized groups, instead reinforcing existing stereotypes.

While tokenism often relies on shallow characters that reinforce stereotypes, both *The Other Americans* (Lalami, 2019) and *Between Two Moons* (Abdel Gawad , 2023) delve beyond surface-level portrayals to explore their protagonists' identity conflicts. Laila Lalami and Aisha Abdel Gawad counter stereotypical narratives by showcasing the multifaceted identities of Arab-American Muslim women through Nora in *The Other Americans* (2019) and Amira and Lina in *Between Two Moons* (2023). Lalami's novel introduces Nora, shaped by her Arab-American heritage, grappling with identity, cultural expectations, and societal pressures. This reality is reflected in her internal conflict when she says: "I could have talked to him one more time, heard the care in his voice, and yet I had squandered the chance" (Lalami, 2019, p. 1). In this context, "him" refers to her father, highlighting the emotional weight of her regret. This multi-dimensionality in Nora's journey starkly contrasts with the simplistic portrayals often seen in the literature and media.

Conversely, in *Between Two Moons* (2023), Abdel Gawad portrays Amira's mother's psychological struggle by juxtaposing her memories of Alexandria with her current life in America:

> When she was a new mother and a new American, she used to lie awake at night and torture herself by remembering a single, sharp detail of the life she had left behind… she would close her eyes and listen to the sounds of the Brooklyn streets below and pretend they were the sounds of Alexandria, the ancient Russian Ladas honking, the tram rumbling past her window. (Abdel Gawad, 2023, p. 191)

This reveals the emotional challenges that Arab-American Muslim women face when crossing cultures, yearning for authenticity and a connection to their roots within a culture that often marginalizes their history. Both Lalami and Abdel Gawad addressed the challenges faced by Arab-American Muslim women in navigating symbolic inclusion and genuine representation. Lalami highlights how humility, a trait often valued within their culture, can be misconstrued as passiveness, hindering their full participation and recognition. She notes: "Humility had been drilled in me, as it was in most of the women I knew, and I found it hard to get rid of it, even though it was frequently mistaken for inability" (Lalami, 2019, p. 199). This underscores the problem of inclusion, where their

presence does not equate to respect or recognition and, in fact, perpetuates stereotypical images (Said, 1978).

Similarly, Abdel Gawad's *Between Two Moons* (2023) illustrates the struggle of Arab-American Muslim women to be seen and understood within cultural narratives. Lina expresses her ambiguous desire for freedom when she says, "Don't let me go back… I didn't know if she meant back to Lotus or back to Andres or that motel, but I nodded anyway because I would have promised her anything" (Abdel Gawad, 2023, p. 215). This quote highlights the internal struggles these women face when navigating cultural and social expectations, as the narrator's promise of "anything" reveals an emotional bond yet underscores the limitations in understanding Lina's complexities.

In addition, Abdel Gawad illustrates the exclusion of Arab-American Muslim women from fully participating in and benefiting from their cultural traditions: "We were women preparing for a feast that we could not yet eat" (Abdel Gawad, 2023, p. 215). This metaphor emphasizes how these women are often visible within a cultural framework, yet their agency and autonomy are limited. Both novels demonstrate a move beyond tokenism, offering nuanced portrayals of Arab-American Muslims who navigate complex societal landscapes (Said, 1978). Through the lens of symbolic inclusion, Laila Lalami's *The Other Americans* (2019) and Aisha Abdel Gawad's *Between Two Moons* (2023) transcend tokenistic representation by providing nuanced, multi-dimensional portrayals of Arab-American Muslim women. These portrayals challenge reductive stereotypes and facilitate a more profound engagement with their complex realities. By situating characters within socio-political contexts and delving into their inner struggles, these authors do more than enhance visibility; they actively critique societal biases that perpetuate inadequate and superficial representations. Lalami and Abdel Gawad's work ultimately advocates the dismantling of tokenistic frameworks and the embrace of complex narratives that promote a deeper understanding of underrepresented voices. Their stories illustrate the rich tapestry of identities within American society, challenging the limits of authentic representation and advocating for true inclusion in literature and beyond.

Conclusion

This study focuses on the representation of Arab-American Muslim women in two narratives, Laila Lalami's *The Other Americans* (2019) and Aisha Abdel Gawad's *Between*

Two Moons (2023), to show how these novels counteract tokenism through complex characterizations. Using symbolic inclusion as an approach, the analysis elucidated how both authors render their works beyond representation, doing so with the lived experiences of their characters that encompass both inner turmoil and the societal constraints of their respective times. Key findings indicate that Lalami and Abdel Gawad present Arab-American Muslim women as complex individuals rather than mere cultural symbols, integrating their cultural backgrounds, personal aspirations, and social conflicts seamlessly into the narrative fabric. In *The Other Americans* (Lalami, 2019), Nora's journey highlights the tension between personal achievement and a public identity defined by ethnicity and religion, while *Between Two Moons* (Abdel Gawad, 2023) explores Amira and Lina's navigation of surveillance, Islamophobia, and cultural negotiation in a world quick to label them as "other." Both novels effectively challenge simplistic stereotypes, presenting characters who actively negotiate Western and Arab-centric gender expectations and assert their agency against patriarchal structures and systemic bias.

Ultimately, the works of Lalami and Abdel Gawad significantly elevate the practice of symbolic inclusion within Arab American literature. By moving beyond tokenism to construct narratives in which the protagonists' identities are integral to complex conflicts and nuanced character development, they illuminate the complexities of identity negotiation and challenge damaging stereotypes. Their texts call for the acknowledgment of the realities of life of Arab American Muslim women, accentuating the need to represent marginalized groups without bias or oversimplification. Such an approach not only counters ineffective attempts to provide a multi-faceted view of diverse cultures but also reveals the literature's ability to build understanding and construct a meaningful discourse on Arab and Muslim identities in the modern world. Although this analysis highlights two particular novels, its conclusions suggest that other works of Arab American literature may benefit from similar strategies designed to explore the multi-layered responses posed by the persistent confrontation with racialization and Islamophobia.

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