



Occidentalism Revisited: Insights from Contemporary Anglophone Arab Diasporic Literature

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Abstract: Occidentalism has traditionally been regarded as a theoretical perspective through which the Arab “self” represents the Western “other.” Scholars who have made critical and insightful contributions to the development of the concept of Occidentalism within Arab literary traditions include Hasan Hanafi, Rasheed El-Enany, Zahia Smail Salhi, and most recently, Ahmed Shalabi and Yousef Abu Amrieh. Shalabi and Abu Amrieh have proposed a new definition of Occidentalism, primarily informed by the study of contemporary Anglophone Arab diasporic literature. They identify a gap in previous discussions concerning the scope and applicability of Occidentalism as a viable theoretical framework. Building on their findings, this paper aims to analyze Layla AlAmmar’s *Silence Is a Sense* and Omar El Akkad’s *What Strange Paradise* as Occidentalistic texts that depict the challenges and hardships Arab immigrants and refugees face in their pursuit of a new life in the “West.” We argue that, through the lens of Occidentalism, the two texts offer nuanced portrayals of the suffering experienced by Arab immigrants and refugees. In doing so, these narratives seek to demystify the romantically held notions about the “West” that many Arab people have adopted while simultaneously drawing Western readers’ attention to the agonies of immigrants and refugees. We conclude that Occidentalism can be utilized as a theoretical framework through which the Arab “self” strives to capture the elusive and delusive reality that many Arab individuals choose to overlook.

Keywords: Occidentalism, *Silence Is a Sense*, *What Strange Paradise*, Layla AlAmmar, Omar El Akkad

1. Introduction

In their recent study “Rawi Hage’s *Cockroach* and Laila Lalami’s *The Other Americans*: Images of Twenty-First Century Occident,” Shalabi and Abu Amrieh (2023) define Occidentalism as:

“[A]n impartial representation of the Occident by Arab intellectuals who are part of the Western communities either as citizens or second-generation immigrants and have first-hand experiences of the ‘West,’ and whose accounts are based on their interaction with different aspects of Western life and knowledge of Western politics and laws” (p.6).

Shalabi and Abu Amrieh’s (2023) definition is based on the analysis of Arab-Canadian Rawi Hage’s *Cockroach* (2008) and Arab-American Laila Lalami’s *The Other Americans* (2019). They propose that the experiences of immigrant characters in contemporary Anglophone Arab diasporic literature offer a new understanding of the concept of Occidentalism. Specifically, in the context of contemporary Anglophone Arab diasporic literature, the Arab “self” tries to create a more realistic image of the Occident that stems from their direct contact with the Western “other.” These Occidentalistic texts, Shalabi and Abu Amrieh argue, draw more nuanced images of the “West” that challenge Arab immigrants’ and refugees’ inherited glamorized images of the Occident (p.3).

Shalabi and Abu Amrieh’s (2023) project to redefine Occidentalism—or rather, to add new dimensions to its definition—sets itself against previous attempts to define the term. In doing so, they enter into dialogue with several scholars and researchers, such as Hanafi (1991), who perceives Occidentalism as a reversal of Edward Said’s Orientalism; El-Enany (2006), who explores the representations of the Western “other” in Arabic fiction and non-fiction produced from the late eighteenth to the late twentieth centuries; Buruma and Margalit (2005), who view Occidentalism as the hatred of the Occident; Chen (1995), who argues that Occidentalism’s definition relies heavily on politics and the ideology of the person defining it; and, most recently, Salhi (2021), who defines Occidentalism as “the stereotyped and sometimes essentialized views on the Occident” (p.205). By drawing on representations of the Western “other” in contemporary Anglophone Arab diasporic literature, Shalabi and Abu Amrieh propose a new perspective for understanding occidentalism. They give substantial weight to Arab diasporic experiences in their redefinition. In this sense, Occidentalism has

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acquired new features that this paper aims to explore by investigating two recent novels that thematically depict the experiences of Arab characters in the "West." By drawing on Shalabi and Abu Amrieh's (2023) recent definition, this study attempts to redirect the academic debate on Occidentalism by exploring the portrayal of Arab immigrants' and refugees' different experiences in the "West" in the literature written by twenty-first-century Anglophone Arab diasporic writers. Previous Occidental studies have not explored the perspective of contemporary Arab diasporic writers on the "West." Thus, the current study aims to investigate these writers' viewpoints on the Occident, which can provide a new understanding of Occidentalism.

AlAmmar's *Silence Is a Sense* and El Akkad's *What Strange Paradise*, two novels published in the wake of the 2015–2016 Syrian Refugee Crisis, explore the dire implications of Arab individuals' resettlement in or movement to Western societies. The two texts epitomize how twenty-first-century Occidental literature creates counter-narratives that defy many Arab people's romantically entrenched images of a utopian Occident and shed light on the difficulties and hardships that Arab immigrants and refugees encounter in the "West." These novels are set in Western spaces, in particular: *Silence Is a Sense* is entirely set in an unnamed English city, where the protagonist's daily experiences reflect the position she occupies in this city, placing her in a good position to comment on what she observes and narrate it to the reader. Similarly, in *What Strange Paradise*, the novel follows the adventure of a young boy who finds himself on the Greek island of Kos, with the omniscient narrator vividly portraying his experiences as he is chased by local authorities. Thus, both novels represent a wide spectrum of the experiences of Arab refugees, with a variety of ages, genders, and even different levels of awareness. Unlike Rawi Hage's *Cockroach* (2008), Hala Alyan's *The Arsonists' City* (2021), and Jamal Mahjoub's *The Fugitives* (2021), which depict the experiences of Arabs in the US and Canada respectively, these two novels focus on Arab refugees' experiences in Europe, particularly Britain and Greece. Finally, both novels depict the protagonists' peregrination as they cross borders, either by death boat or land, with all the concomitant perils and threats.

The literary productions of contemporary Anglophone Arab diasporic writers are not—and cannot be—writing back to the orientalist discourse, simply because diasporic Arab writers have become part of the Occident, as they are often citizens of their host countries. These writers have a contrapuntal vision of both the East and the West. They are familiar with what it means to be an Arab immigrant in a Western society; at the same time, they are aware of the inherited idealized image of the Occident that many Arab people have adopted for centuries. Moreover, their exploration of the experiences of diasporic selves is not a misrepresentation of the other. They tend to redress their readers' conceptions of the Occident by foregrounding the obstacles and dilemmas that Arab immigrants may face during their journeys to or lives in the "West." As Shalabi and Abu Amrieh illustrate in their aforementioned study, twenty-first-century Anglophone Arab diasporic writers speak to both the Orient and the Occident. Their protagonists or characters are usually Arab individuals who illegally or legally live in the "West" and face socio-cultural challenges in their daily experiences.

By relaying accounts of the harsh realities that immigrants and refugees face, these narratives simultaneously seek to demystify many Arab people's preconceived notions about the "West" and draw Western readers' attention to the agonies of immigrants and refugees. In this sense, they align with Hassan's (2011) view of Arab immigrant writers as "cultural translators" and mediators who create a bridge between Western and Arab cultures (Almommani, 2024). Hassan positions these writers as cultural translators due to their bilingualism (knowledge of both English and Arabic):

"The bilingual writer who explains one culture to another is necessarily a cultural translator. In the case of a writer of two languages, cultural translation is a two-way activity, since s/he explains each culture to the other" (p.63).

This perspective resonates with the argument of this paper: contemporary Anglophone Arab diasporic writers' knowledge of both cultures enables them to engage with each culture's preconceived notions about the other. Furthermore, Hassan views immigrant literature as *minor literature* because it encompasses the characteristics of minor literature as defined by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. According to Hassan:

"Because of the marginal status of minor literature, 'everything in them is political'—[which] means that there is little distance between the individual concerns and the political status of the minor group" (p.5).

This view aligns with the analysis of contemporary Anglophone Arab diasporic literature. As the following sections will demonstrate, Arab diasporic writers engage deeply with the socio-political experiences of Arab immigrants in the Occident. Consequently, as members of a marginalized group, they insightfully reflect on the socio-political challenges faced by their community in the "West."

Both AlAmmar's and El Akkad's novels are set against the backdrop of the devastating repercussions of the Syrian revolution and the ensuing civil war. As part of the Arab Spring, the Syrian revolution began in 2011 as a series of peaceful protests that gradually spread across Syria, demanding an end to the regime's dictatorship and measures against the inhumane treatment of its citizens. Thousands of people were killed and incarcerated as the regime responded with excessive force. Due to the increasingly harsh living conditions and pervasive insecurity, many Syrians were compelled to leave their country in search of safer destinations where they could rebuild their lives. As Akhmedov (2022) observes, Syria's demographic landscape changed dramatically as a result of the civil

war, with “[b]y the spring of 2017, from 7 to 9 million people” (p.719) fleeing to Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt. Many others attempted to illegally cross the Mediterranean on decrepit boats and rubber dinghies.

As contemporary Anglophone Arab diasporic writers, AlAmmar and El Akkad portray the difficult circumstances and adversities faced by Arab immigrants in the “West.” Their work encourages the Arab “self” to reconsider its entrenched stereotypes about the “other” and aims to increase the “other’s” awareness of the immigrants’ experiences. This intention aligns with AlAmmar’s discussion of the credibility of the unnamed narrator’s experiences in *Silence Is a Sense*. In an interview, she reveals the lengths she went to in researching refugee experiences to ensure her narrative’s plausibility. She states:

“This is a real pain, real trauma, and I try not to slip into an over-identification or an appropriation of that, and try to respect and maintain that distance as much as I can. I think that we as writers . . . feel compelled to tell these stories, but at the same time we need to do it in an ethical and responsible way, and try as much as we can to respect the distance between a representation and an actual lived experience” (Magers & Quinn Booksellers, 2021, 38:07–39:09).

AlAmmar’s words underscore her commitment to authenticity. As her narrator recounts her experiences in Britain, the reader becomes acutely aware of the liminal space in which she exists. Similarly, as readers witness the hardships endured by El Akkad’s young protagonist on the Greek island of Kos, they gain insight into the perils of attempting to enter Fortress Europe. Both authors bring first-hand perspectives of the “West” to their narratives, as AlAmmar has lived in the UK for an extended period, while El Akkad grew up in Canada and currently resides in the United States. Thus, Shalabi and Abu Amrieh’s (2023) newly proposed definition of Occidentalism serves as an apt lens for analyzing these texts.

2. Literature review

Many scholars, such as Hanafi (1991), emphasize that Occidentalism is the opposite of Said’s Orientalism. That is, through Occidentalism, the Eastern “other” becomes the researcher, and the Western “self” becomes the subject. However, the representations of the Occident in contemporary Anglophone Arab diasporic literature indicate that Occidentalism is not a reaction to or rejection of Orientalism, since these representations are not meant to distort or stereotype the image of the Occident. They are meant to challenge the Arab “self’s” preconceived notions about the Western “other” and draw the “other’s” attention to the sufferings of the immigrant “self.”

Shalabi and Abu Amrieh’s (2023) definition highlights important new features that help conceptualize “Occidentalism” as a theoretical framework for reading and analyzing contemporary diasporic literature. One feature concerns the identity of the author, who, according to them, should be of Arab descent and permanently live in the West. This allows them to have first-hand experiences of multiple facets of European or American life that they artistically reflect in their narratives. Second, one must consider the reliability of the narrator and the multiple voices heard in the narrative. Here, we deduce that the credibility of the narrative should be tested against its sociopolitical, cultural, and historical context. Third, the setting of the text must be carefully considered. For a text to be labeled Occidentalism and read through the lens of Occidentalism, the events must predominantly take place in the “West.” Fourth, the protagonist should be of Arab ancestry who has lived long enough in the “West” or has immigrated there with the hope of improving their living conditions. Finally, in the Occidentalism literature that Shalabi and Abu Amrieh (2023) examine, the characters or protagonists are disillusioned when they realize that their glamorized image of the Occident clashes with their real experiences. Most often, their dreams of thriving become nightmares of barely surviving in a completely different version of the “West” from what they had imagined. These features can help decide whether or not Occidentalism—according to Shalabi and Abu Amrieh (2023)—can be applied as a theoretical framework to read a particular literary text. Accordingly, the goal of this paper is to read Layla AlAmmar’s *Silence Is a Sense* (2021) and Omar El Akkad’s *What Strange Paradise* (2021) as two Occidentalism texts that encompass several features of Shalabi and Abu Amrieh’s (2023) “Occidentalism.”

3. Methodology

The current study applies Shalabi and Abu Amrieh’s (2023) recently proposed definition of Occidentalism to two contemporary Anglophone Arab diasporic texts to illustrate that in the twenty-first century, the literature of Anglophone Arab diasporic writers has offered a new dimension and understanding of Occidentalism. The study also traces the new features of Occidentalism, Layla AlAmmar’s *Silence Is a Sense* and Omar El Akkad’s *What Strange Paradise*, that Shalabi and Abu Amrieh (2023) propose to illustrate that these texts can be read through the lens of Occidentalism. This study conducts a textual and contextual analysis of the two novels, positing them in their social, political, and economic contexts to elucidate that the political turmoil that the Arab world has witnessed in the twenty-first century have contributed to reshaping Arab intellectuals’ view of the Occident.

4. Discussion

4.1. The Puppet Arab Refugee in Layla AlAmmar’s *Silence Is a Sense*

Layla AlAmmar earned her MA in Creative Writing from the University of Edinburgh and recently completed a PhD focusing on Arab women’s literature and literary trauma theory at Lancaster University. Her work has appeared in *The Evening Standard*, *TLS*, *The Guardian*, *Lithub*, *Arablit Quarterly*, and *Aesthetica Magazine*, where

she was a finalist for the 2014 Creative Writing Award. Her debut novel, *The Pact We Made* (2019), was nominated for the Edinburgh International Book Festival First Book Award and the Author's Club First Novel Award. Her second novel, *Silence Is a Sense* (2021), was shortlisted for the William Saroyan International Prize for Writing.

The focal point of *Silence Is a Sense* is its protagonist's inability to overcome the trauma stemming from the horrific events she endured during Syria's civil war. Through a stream-of-consciousness narrative, the Syrian female asylum seeker reflects on the atrocities witnessed by her, her family, and her friends during the revolution. She describes how death became an inescapable part of daily life in Syria. Consequently, like many others, she sought refuge in Europe, hoping to find the "safe haven" where she could leave her past behind and begin anew. However, her traumatic experiences continue to haunt her in exile.

The narrator's persistent feeling of trauma, according to Khalaf (2022), is attributed to her "involuntary dislocation" (p.1203), as she is forced to leave her homeland and settle in a Western country. However, Khalaf argues that the relocation of the Syrian refugee does not help her overcome her past trauma; instead, it exposes her to new trauma prompted by racism in Britain. In her review of the novel, Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett emphasizes AlAmmar's skill in depicting human trauma, stating that AlAmmar "is a writer who understands trauma, how it fragments the memory and turns people into startled animals" (Cosslett, 2021). Both Khalaf and Cosslett contend that trauma shapes the way the narrator perceives the world around her and, we might add, leads to her disillusionment with the "West." Khalaf's and Cosslett's perspectives support the idea that the exclusion of the Syrian refugee in Britain paints a less alluring image of the utopian "West"—an image that challenges certain Arab people's widely held preconceptions of that alleged utopia.

The unnamed narrator's disillusionment with the "West" gradually escalates when Josie, the editor of an online magazine, coerces her to write about her past trauma and memories rather than her personal interests. Initially, the narrator appears unaware that Josie does not perceive her as a writer capable of contributing to readers' broader knowledge. Instead, Josie repeatedly asks her to focus on memories and experiences of war, as these are popular topics that attract readership. Josie's position recalls Long's and Saber's (2020) argument that even global organizations exploit stories, documents, and photos of Syrian refugees for financial gain. Commenting on how photos of Syrian refugees on the UNHCR's website are used to validate the agency's operations and simultaneously serve as promotional material, Long and Saber assert that "the refugee experience [becomes] aestheticized as tradable promotional items for the work of UNHCR or the organizations and individuals that reuse their images" (p.453). Similarly, editors like Josie implicitly exploit refugee narratives to enhance their magazines' marketability, as demonstrated in AlAmmar's novel. Through her firsthand experience of the Occident, AlAmmar, as a contemporary Anglophone Arab diasporic writer, is keenly aware of the challenges Arab refugees and immigrants encounter.

As Shalabi and Abu Amrieh (2023) remind us, Orientalism is "a mechanism through which Orientalist literature sheds light on the unconceived matters that Arabs, whether immigrants or living in the Arab world, are oblivious to" (p.1). AlAmmar's narrative, as an Orientalist text, illuminates a sensitive issue that often goes unnoticed: the opportunistic portrayal of refugees' past experiences by Western media to attract readers. For Shalabi and Abu Amrieh (2023), this represents a novel theme vividly depicted in this branch of Orientalist literature. In *Silence Is a Sense*, the protagonist's feelings of insecurity and withdrawal from public spaces underscore the dissonance between her expectations and reality. Initially, she leaves Syria and moves to Britain, believing that security and liberty are hallmarks of life there. However, she soon realizes that, in Britain, she—like many other immigrants—is perceived as a threat. Consequently, she becomes a target of racist and xenophobic practices. The security she had aspired to turns into an enduring sense of anxiety and insecurity. Furthermore, her disillusionment deepens when she understands that her and other immigrants' and refugees' real stories of anguish are viewed as exotic, entertaining tales that boost Western media's readership and financial returns. This realization is starkly evident when she reads Josie's comments on her article "Sweet Dews," which will be discussed in the following sections.

The findings of Cooper, Blumell, and Bunce's study, *Beyond the "Refugee Crisis": How the UK News Media Represent Asylum Seekers Across National Boundaries* (2021), reveal that refugees and asylum seekers from the Middle East "were far more likely to be portrayed as associated with security risk and terrorist activities" (p.197). This bias becomes evident when the protagonist receives Josie's response to her article "The Others," in which she argues that refugees do not pose a threat to their host countries. Similarly, Buchanan, Grill, and Threadgold's (2004) study on the image of refugees in British media highlights that, when interviewed, refugees are often subjected to "hidden agendas" (p. 9) designed to serve the interviewer's purposes, which may include perpetuating stereotypes of refugees as threats to English society. This aligns with Josie's fixation on the narrator's traumatic past and her constant encouragement to publish memories motivated by such hidden agendas.

Furthermore, Georgiou and Zaborowski (2017) observe that, during the 2015 refugee crisis, European media portrayed "new arrivals . . . as outsiders and different to Europeans: either as vulnerable outsiders or as dangerous outsiders" (p.2). Refugees were rarely given a direct voice in these portrayals; instead, they were often spoken about or represented in images as silent actors and victims (p.2). Similarly, in British news stories, "political elites dominated as sources within news texts; refugees, asylum seekers, immigrants, and migrants, regardless of their country of origin, were rarely quoted within news reports" (Cooper et al., 2021, p.197). According to Chouliaraki

and Zaborowski (2017), European media's tendency to reduce refugees to statistics or non-entities and to exaggerate their "vulnerability" contributed to their exclusion from European socio-political realms. Most significantly, these misrepresentations "render the refugee[s] 'voiceless'" (p.618), stripping them of authority to assert their existence as citizens of their host countries.

The above comments on the voicelessness of refugees resonate with AlAmmar's protagonist's sociopolitical and cultural condition. In the novel, the unnamed narrator corresponds with Josie under the pseudonym "The Voiceless," and her articles are published under that name. She refrains from revealing her real name until nearly the end of the book. This reluctance to communicate orally with those around her is not only a product of her past trauma and her belief that language has failed her, but it also stems from her understanding that she, like other refugees, is not expected to write about her own views on certain issues. Instead, she turns to writing because, as Ibrahim, Alkhawaja, and Yaseen (2024) observe, "literary language can expose the unconscious of the author and tell a great deal about her/his inner complex world" (p.795). However, in Britain, she comes to realize that she is reduced to a pen whose words are dictated by Josie.

Josie's actions capitalize on the stereotypical image of the Arab woman in Western media—as silent, submissive, and controlled by patriarchal powers. In this sense, the narrator is cast into the same mould and is not allowed to deviate from the path Josie has laid out for her. The narrative suggests that the Syrian female asylum seeker fled her country in search of security, peace, and, most importantly, freedom of expression. She reflects on these aspirations at various points in the novel. However, like other refugees, she appears unaware of the oppressive power dynamics that render her subordinate to Josie's towering demands.

The Syrian refugee narrates Josie's feedback on one of her articles titled "The Others," in which she openly defends Arab refugees and challenges the British public's prejudiced views of them. This article coincides with the London Bridge attacks of June 3, 2017, in which eight people were killed. She condemns British xenophobia, arguing that refugees are unfairly perceived as threats to the country's economy, security, and stability. However, she is shocked by Josie's response, which ostensibly reassures her of her freedom to express her views but subtly undermines her position. Josie writes:

"What I want to say is that I'm concerned you might be glossing over the very real, unequivocal violence that has been occurring in Great Britain over the last few months. In making your statements about Islamophobia and refugees, etc., I'm afraid you might be downplaying the horrific violence that is happening on our streets" (AlAmmar, 2021, p.127).

Josie's insistence on acknowledging the identity of the attackers reflects a broader tendency within British media to prioritize the sufferings of British citizens while perpetuating stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims as inherently violent. Furthermore, her sharp tone, accusing the narrator of "trivializing" (AlAmmar, 2021, p.127) violence in Britain, implies that the narrator is not—and must not be—entitled to freely express herself. This realization leaves the Syrian refugee disillusioned about the liberty she once fantasized about. The conflicting perspectives—Western belief that refugees are threats and the protagonist's certainty that refugees are unfairly stereotyped—support Shalabi and Abu Amrieh's (2023) assertion that "Occidentalism simultaneously addresses both the Orient and the Occident" (p.7), seeking to bridge the gap between each side's preconceived notions about the other.

As an Occidentalist text, AlAmmar's novel uncovers critical and often overlooked issues regarding the status of immigrants and refugees for both Eastern and Western readers. The narrative suggests that *infra-humanization*—a form of emotional prejudice—may explain why refugees' and immigrants' struggles are often dismissed by mainstream audiences. Josie's attitude exemplifies this tendency, as her sympathy for the British victims of the attack contrasts starkly with her disregard for the countless Syrians and other ethnic groups who have been killed. This ethnocentrism fuels her *infra-humanization* of immigrants. Leyens et al. (2003) describe *infra-humanization* as a phenomenon in which "people ascribe the human essence to their ingroup and consider outgroups as less human" (p.703).

The protagonist recognizes this practice when she receives Josie's feedback on her article. She comes to understand that her own suffering—and by extension, that of other refugees—exists outside her host country's sphere of concern. This realization deepens her trauma and reinforces her awareness that the "West" prefers to remain deaf to the plight of her people. Moreover, she becomes increasingly cognizant of the fact that, as a member of the "outgroup," there is little hope of overcoming her past trauma when the narratives of her people's war and loss are relegated to the margins—or worse, erased entirely—by institutions like Josie's magazine.

Furthermore, Haslam and Loughnan (2014) note that *infra-humanization* can lead to a complete denial of the humanity of outgroup members, suggesting that "[i]n *infra-humanization* has a variety of behavioral implications, and it appears to involve not simply a lack of recognition of the outgroup's humanity but also an active reluctance to accept it" (p. 402). In the novel, the Syrian refugee comes to terms with the reality of her position: she is *infra-humanized* by Josie. Consequently, instead of moving past her trauma, she experiences new and compounding trauma in her host country.

Josie's infra-humanization of the "out-group" becomes particularly evident after the publication of the unnamed narrator's story titled "*Sweet Dew*." The story recounts the harrowing experience of eight Syrian refugees smuggled out of Syria in the back of a refrigerated truck. Through her story, the unnamed narrator seeks to highlight the agony of being frozen to death in the desperate pursuit of safety in Europe. Josie enthusiastically praises the story, stating:

"I love this. It's one thing to be able to write opinion pieces on the issues of the day and how they affect you; it's quite another to be able to construct a piece of fiction that is as tight and moving as 'Sweet Dew.' I feel like fiction is a liberating medium for you" (AlAmmar, 2021, p.131, italics in original).

However, speaking to herself, the unnamed narrator ruefully responds: "Yes, Josie, fiction is very liberating" (AlAmmar, 2021, p.131). Her dissatisfaction stems from her realization that the genuine pain and suffering of her community serve as mere entertainment for Josie's group. Josie's role as a journalist underscores her tendency to exploit the experiences of the unnamed narrator and other refugees to promote her online magazine.

The experiences depicted in "*Sweet Dew*" are not fictional inventions but closely mirror real events. Syrian refugees, compelled by the brutal realities of the civil war, often resorted to paying smugglers to transport them to safer destinations. One means of transportation involved refrigerated trucks, where refugees were tragically found dead in many cases. Such incidents garnered significant media attention. For instance, during the refugee crisis in 2015, *Reuters* reported on three Syrian refugees found dead in a refrigerated truck in Austria (Rodi, 2015). Similarly, *The Guardian* highlighted the 2019 discovery of thirty-nine Vietnamese migrants who suffocated in a container in England (Gentleman, 2019). Reflecting on this tragedy, BBC Arabic interviewed a Syrian-Kurdish refugee who expressed deep sympathy, drawing parallels with his own journey in a refrigerated truck to Britain (Hasan, 2019).

Josie's characterization of the story as mere fiction, rather than a portrayal of genuine pain, forces the unnamed narrator to confront the disturbing reality that the brutal experiences of refugees are treated as exciting fantasy material for Western readers. Paskey (2016) explains that such narratives are often perceived as fictional because "the stories told by trauma survivors defy our expectations for a 'credible' story" (p.461). By interrogating the media's role in shaping perceptions of immigrants and refugees, AlAmmar sheds light on a nuanced challenge faced by those seeking resettlement in the "West." This aligns with Shalabi and Abu Amrieh's (2023) assertion that contemporary Anglophone Arab diasporic writers use Occidentalism to highlight the genuine struggles and suffering of Arab immigrants and refugees. The unnamed narrator's experience represents a moralistic shock that many Arab immigrants and refugees may encounter when their inherited and idealized images of the "West" clash with reality.

4.2. Omar El Akkad's *What Strange Paradise*: Western paradise is a mirage

Omar El Akkad is an Egyptian-Canadian novelist and journalist. Born in Egypt and raised in Qatar, he moved to Canada as a teenager and earned a degree in computer science from Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario. He now resides in the United States. El Akkad's career as a journalist began during the onset of the "War on Terror," and he spent a decade reporting from various global hotspots, including Afghanistan, Guantanamo Bay, and Egypt. His debut novel, *American War* (2017), was translated into thirteen languages and received the Pacific Northwest Booksellers' Award. His second novel, *What Strange Paradise* (2021), won the Giller Prize and was selected for the 2022 edition of *Canada Reads*.

El Akkad's journalistic background gives him unique insight into contemporary global events. Coupled with his hyphenated identity, he seamlessly navigates both Eastern and Western perspectives. As Shalabi and Abu Amrieh (2023) note, contemporary Anglophone Arab diasporic writers' "accounts are reliable since they are based on their first-hand experiences of the 'West'" (p.19). These writers' nuanced portrayals of the Occident are grounded in direct engagement with Western cultures and lifestyles while maintaining strong ties to Arab traditions and an intimate awareness of ongoing events in the Arab world. This dual perspective enables writers like El Akkad to construct narratives that challenge the romanticized perceptions of the "West."

In *What Strange Paradise*, El Akkad explores the plight of refugee children, a subject that has received limited attention in traditional Occidentalist literature. Of particular interest is his appropriation of Barrie's *Peter Pan: The Boy Who Would Never Grow Up to be a Man* (1916) to illustrate the dilemmas faced by refugee children.

The novel tells the story of Amir, a nine-year-old Syrian boy who wakes up on the shores of the Greek island of Kos. Through alternating timelines, the narrative reveals Amir's journey: he escapes war-torn Syria with his uncle and mother to Egypt. In Egypt, Amir's uncle secretly plans to cross the Mediterranean to Europe. Amir, unaware of the plan, sneaks onto the dilapidated boat his uncle boards. The journey ends in disaster, with Amir as the sole survivor among the passengers, including his uncle.

The novel alternates between Amir's attempts to evade the police on the island and flashbacks to the perilous voyage that brought him there. Through Amir's perspective, El Akkad vividly captures the harsh realities of migration and displacement. His narrative challenges the myth of the "Western paradise," portraying it instead as a mirage that conceals the suffering and hardships experienced by refugees.

The novel's title, *What Strange Paradise*, evokes a sense of amazement, disillusionment, or shock. Arab immigrants often aspire to reach the "West," envisioning it as a true paradise. However, when Amir arrives on the Greek island, the opposite proves true. Refugees, deemed threats to the island's welfare, are subjected to strict surveillance and detained in centers they are forbidden to leave. In this regard, Tsitselikis (2019) criticizes Greek authorities' policies of detaining refugees, noting that they "are often keen on making harder the life of those who intend to arrive and of those who have already arrived in Greece: detention is a collateral aim or a tool for the 'irregulation' of refugees" (p.13). From this perspective, it can be argued that El Akkad's novel intends from the outset to draw the reader's attention to the hardships refugees encounter in the "West"—a truth unknown to the passengers on the boat and many Arabs alike.

Commenting on some Arab people's fantasies about the "West" and their overly romanticized image of the life awaiting them there, El Akkad reveals in an interview that he "thought [he] was writing a book that took place at the collision point of two fantasies" (CGC Amman, 2021). These fantasies, as El Akkad explains, run in opposite directions:

"One headed in one direction that said everyone coming here from over there is a barbarian at the gate, and we need to build better gates, even if we need to burn down our own end of things to keep them out. . . . The fantasy headed in the other direction being if I can just make it over there, everything will be okay" (CGC Amman, 24:53–25:09).

El Akkad's words underscore his aim to examine the collision of these two fantasies. This aligns with Shalabi and Abu Amrieh's (2023) argument that contemporary Anglophone Arab diasporic writers "tend to present a new nuanced image of the Occident" (p.2). Accordingly, his novel seeks to bridge the gap between fantasies and reality, helping the Arab "self" disentangle itself from the myth of the "West." In this context, Mike Doherty remarks that the novel "delves into the experience of those who pay smugglers and put themselves in grave danger in hopes of finding safety in the 'West'" (Doherty, 2021). Similarly, Ron Charles notes that the book "functions on several levels at once, critiquing the West's indifference while interrogating the refugees' blended cynicism and naivete" (Charles, 2021). Refugees are blinded by the paradisiacal image of the "West," captivated by the fantasy of a better life. However, upon arrival, they discover that the paradise they sought is a mirage; the "West" is not the utopia they imagined.

Amir's story parallels that of Alan (also spelled Aylan) Kurdi, a Syrian-Kurdish boy whose lifeless body washed up on Turkish shores in 2015. Reports revealed that Alan and his family drowned while attempting to reach Greece. The photo of Alan's body went viral, sparking worldwide sorrow over the humanitarian catastrophe. In *What Strange Paradise*, El Akkad uses Amir's experience to fictionally depict what might have happened had Alan survived and reached European shores. Through the adventures of Amir and Vanna, a native girl on the island, El Akkad guides the reader through the treatment refugees face once identified by authorities. For example, Nimra, who oversees the gymnasium where refugees are held, reflects on their status: "Sometimes they're made to live in places like this gymnasium for a very long time" (El Akkad, 2021, p.100). Nimra's observation underscores the harsh reality that the paradise refugees envisioned is nothing more than a fantasy.

Cheliotis (2013), in his study on the politics of immigration detention centers in Greece, reveals that refugees or asylum seekers can be detained for up to 18 months while authorities review their documents and statuses. Due to overcrowding, police and border guard stations are often used as long-term detention facilities despite lacking the necessary infrastructure to house large numbers of individuals for extended periods. Cheliotis explains that these conditions worsen the suffering of detainees when they are transferred to these unsuitable facilities:

"[D]ue largely to reasons of overcrowding[,] police and border guard stations are commonly used to detain migrants for extended periods of time" (p.730).

In El Akkad's novel, the third-person narrator reflects on the refugees' plight, describing them as "watchers, honed by captivity into seasoned observers of incremental change" (El Akkad, 2021, p.129). This description portrays the refugees as voiceless, helpless prisoners and captures the inhumane conditions they endure in detention centers. As Cheliotis reminds us, detention often "entails lengthy exposure to conditions that amount to inhuman and degrading treatment" (p.731). Through his depiction, El Akkad reveals a reality that starkly contrasts with the refugees' expectations of life in the "West." His representations of the humiliation and suffering experienced by refugees in these facilities challenge the idealized image of the "West" as a haven of wealth and freedom.

From this perspective, the novel's title can be interpreted as an interjectional phrase expressing the disappointment of realizing that the "paradise" one has imagined is far removed from reality. This fantastical "paradise" drives Amir's uncle, Younis, to selfishly leave his family at midnight in pursuit of a supposedly burden-free life. Like many other Syrians, he is desperate to escape the ravages of the civil war. However, his naivety becomes evident when he responds to Amir's question about his decision to leave, saying he "was going away. . . . But only for a little while and only to see if it is true, if what they say" (El Akkad, 2021, p.121). His words reveal his quest to test the truth behind "the myth of the West." It can also be inferred that Younis is motivated by the deeply entrenched and idealized image of the "West." He represents a segment of Arab individuals whom Ronis, the refugee registrar on the island, describes as people who "don't think" or "plan" (El Akkad, 2021, p.47). Their

longing for the promised “paradise” blinds them to the consequences of their actions, prompting impulsive decisions to leave.

The novel serves as a counter-narrative to conventional success stories of Arab immigrants in the “West.” It sheds light on the miserable conditions faced by a refugee child, an issue that only an Occidentalist growing up in the “West” is likely to grasp and portray. In this sense, El Akkad positions himself as a spokesperson for marginalized and vulnerable individuals. This focus also differentiates El Akkad from El-Enany’s Occidentalists, whose works do not explore such issues, as these phenomena were not prevalent at the time they were writing.

As Amir observes the crowd preparing to board the boat, a group of teenagers mockingly suggests that these people are brainwashed by smugglers, who have told them they’re “going to America, . . . Freedom, McDonald’s, Tom Cruise, all that horseshit” (El Akkad, 2021, p.50). The teenagers’ comments highlight two contrasting versions of “paradise”: the glamorized vision deeply ingrained in the unconscious of Arab immigrants and the harsh reality awaiting them. This demystification of the idealized “West” becomes a central theme in the boat’s conversations. The boat transforms into a polyphonic space where two clashing voices emerge: that of Mohamed, the Syrian smuggler, who cautions against unrealistic expectations of the “West,” and the defiant voices of the passengers, who refuse to heed his warnings.

Mohamed’s perspective on the Occident carries significant weight. Smugglers are often stereotyped as deceitful and exploitative, yet El Akkad subverts this perception by portraying Mohamed as a character who critiques the “West” with clarity and foresight. This irony draws attention to the falsity of the idealized “West” in the minds of the passengers. As a smuggler, Mohamed has firsthand knowledge of the catastrophic failures and dashed hopes of those who preceded them. He understands the fantasies harbored by his passengers and the grim realities that await them in Europe. In one poignant moment, he prophetically warns Maher, one of the refugees, saying: “That’s how I know you won’t make it: you carry stories around. You’ve got a storybook idea about how it’ll end up, you’ve got a storybook view of the world” (El Akkad, 2021, p.124).

Mohamed’s criticism of the idealized “West” is unrelenting, despite his own livelihood as a smuggler relying on selling illusions to desperate people. This becomes particularly evident when a foghorn from an approaching ship incites excitement among the passengers, who rush to the bow for a closer look. Furious, Mohamed shouts:

“If the people on that ship find you, one of two things will happen. Either they’ll call the navy to come to arrest you, or they’ll sink you themselves. Whatever lies you’ve told yourselves about the kindness of the Westerners, you need to forget that bullshit right now, because I promise you they will do anything they can to make sure you go back where you came from, or die out here” (El Akkad, 2021, p.119).

This statement reflects Mohamed’s awareness of European authorities’ harsh treatment of illegal asylum seekers. He knows the likely fates of the passengers if they are intercepted: arrest or drowning. His warning echoes accusations leveled against Greek authorities, who have been criticized for their practices regarding refugee boats. Recently, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that Greece violated the European Convention of Human Rights in the 2014 sinking of a migrant boat, which resulted in the deaths of 11 asylum seekers, including eight children (Stamatoukou 2022, para. 1). Mohamed’s admonitions are not exaggerated fabrications but rather stark truths aimed at tempering the passengers’ expectations.

Mohamed’s reliability as a source of information stems from his role as a smuggler, who often acts as a guide offering advice and instructions to refugees. Mandić’s study (2017), *Trafficking and Syrian Refugee Smuggling: Evidence from the Balkan Route*, supports this view, noting that Syrian refugees during the 2015 crisis “perceive[d] [smugglers] as guides [and] advisors” (p.28). In this sense, Mohamed becomes a whistleblower, urging immigrants to abandon their delusions and confront the reality of their situation. By challenging the exaggerated idealization of the “West,” Mohamed embodies a critical voice that demystifies the myth of paradise for those on the boat.

Mohamed’s persistent calls for people to abandon their romanticized images of the West are thematically significant. For instance, in a confrontation with Walid, one of the illegal immigrants onboard, Mohamed declares:

“And that’s exactly what I am . . . when you get over there to the promised land, and you see how those dignified, civilized Westerners treat you—when you find out what they expect of you is to live your whole life like a dog under their dinner table—I’ll wait for you to come find me and apologize” (El Akkad, 2021, pp.162–163).

Mohamed’s enraged response to Walid’s insult reflects his certainty that the immigrants are bewitched by an idealized image of the “West.” He is convinced that the so-called “promised land” is a fabricated myth that Arab immigrants and refugees have internalized and polished until it seems like an indisputable truth. Furthermore, Mohamed links their current plight to their belief in this mythical “paradise.” When Walid complains about the lack of blankets onboard and accuses Mohamed of deceit, Mohamed retorts:

“You lied to yourself. . . by the time we started lying to you, you’d already believed it” (El Akkad, 2021, p.162).

Mohamed's words highlight how some people's ingrained faith in the existence of a utopian Occident leads them to make reckless decisions with potentially fatal consequences. El Akkad's portrayal of Mohamed as a smuggler-cum-whistleblower metaphorically likens him to a foghorn, warning of impending danger. Critiquing some Arab people's infatuation with the myth of the West, Mohamed angrily proclaims:

"The West you talk about doesn't exist. It's a fairy tale, a fantasy . . . You invent an entire world because your conscience demands it, you invent good people and bad people and you draw a neat line between them because your simplistic morality demands it. But the two kinds of people in this world aren't good and bad—they're engines and fuel. Go ahead, change your country, change your name, change your accent, pull the skin right off your bones, but in their eyes, they will always be engines and you will always, always be fuel" (El Akkad 2021, p.179).

This passage is a sharp denunciation of the perpetuated "myth of the West." It also critiques assimilation, as Mohamed warns that attempts to integrate into Western societies will ultimately be futile. Knowing what awaits refugees in the "West," he emphasizes that no matter what they do to conform, they will always be viewed as outsiders and resources to be exploited.

Mohamed's conviction that refugees and asylum-seekers will face insurmountable challenges upon reaching European shores is underscored by the introduction of Colonel Kethros. Modeled after Captain Hook from J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan: The Boy Who Would Never Grow Up to be a Man*, Colonel Kethros serves as Amir's nemesis. He relentlessly pursues Amir to detain him with other refugees, viewing them as threats to his country's economy and security. Hyperbolically, he refers to refugees as "colonizers" (El Akkad, 2021, p.153), revealing the extent of his animosity toward those who arrive on the island. As an officer and citizen of the island, Kethros's anti-immigration stance contrasts sharply with the ideals immigrants and refugees hope to experience in the "West."

Colonel Kethros also highlights Western society's tokenistic and opportunistic exploitation of unaccompanied refugee children. Near the novel's conclusion, he confronts Amir and declares:

"You should know who you are. . . You are the temporary object of their fraudulent grief. They will march the streets on your behalf, they will write to politicians on your behalf, they will cry on your behalf, but you are to them in the end nothing but a hook on which to hang the best possible image of themselves. Today you are the only boy in the world, and tomorrow you will be as though you never existed" (El Akkad, 2021, p.231).

Kethros's statement reveals the hypocrisy of some Western politicians, who outwardly express sympathy for refugees but exploit their plight to gain logistical and financial support from international relief organizations. The critical issue of unaccompanied refugee children is well-documented; for example, Human Rights Watch has reported severe violations of children's rights in several host countries. In Greece, Giannopoulou and Gill (2019) document that unaccompanied children are often abused by police, detained in overcrowded facilities, and denied information about their situation or future. They suffer psychological and physical harm due to the negligence and mistreatment of local authorities (p. 126). Similarly, Chak and Mujahid (2018) and Digidiki and Bhabha (2018) highlight instances of violence, sexual abuse, and exploitation faced by refugee children in Greece.

As an officer tasked with managing the refugee crisis, Colonel Kethros embodies the stereotypical Western "self" with entrenched views of the "other." His interactions with Amir and the refugees reflect the broader systemic issues and prejudices that exacerbate their suffering.

El Akkad's exploration of the often-unseen struggles faced by Arab immigrants and refugees highlights how *Occidentalism* functions as a framework to challenge the Arab "self's" idealized image of the Western "other" while making the "other" aware of the immigrant/refugee "self's" struggles. As Shalabi and Abu Amrieh (2023) observe, *Occidentalism* seeks to "greatly diminish the gap between an idealised image of the Occident and a starker reality that is less acknowledged" (p.6). In this sense, El Akkad's *What Strange Paradise*, like AlAmmar's *Silence Is a Sense*, exemplifies Occidental literature that seeks to portray the complexities of refugees' and immigrants' journeys to the Occident without embellishment.

5. Conclusion

This study concludes that *Occidentalism*, as defined by Shalabi and Abu Amrieh, can be effectively employed as a theoretical framework to analyze AlAmmar's *Silence Is a Sense* and El Akkad's *What Strange Paradise*, as both narratives encompass several features of Occidentalism. First, both AlAmmar and El Akkad are of Arab ancestry, have firsthand experiences of the "West," and possess deep awareness of Western sentiments, policies, and cultures. Their narratives do not misrepresent the Occident, as they "do not advocate anti-Western attitudes"; rather, they reflect the realities that Arab immigrants and refugees may *truly* face in the Occident (Shalabi and Abu Amrieh, 2023, p.5). Second, the secondary sources cited in this article affirm that AlAmmar's and El Akkad's narratives are credible and depict plausible events grounded in contemporary sociopolitical, cultural, and historical contexts. Third, the two texts fall under the umbrella of Occidental literature because the events predominantly take place in the "West": one in Britain and the other on a Greek island. Finally, the protagonists and characters in both narratives are of Arab heritage, whose romanticized, entrenched image of the Occident collides with reality upon their arrival at their destinations.

Theoretically, this article has demonstrated that the works of Anglophone diasporic Arab writers offer new perspectives for understanding the concept of Occidentalism. The notion that Occidentalism is merely “Orientalism in reverse” remains invalid, as the texts under discussion, alongside other Anglophone Arab diasporic narratives, do not misrepresent or distort the image of the Occident (see Shalabi and Amrieh, 2024). Instead, they strive to realistically portray what Arab immigrants may face as they attempt to start new lives in the Occident. Through Occidentalism, the portrayal of the Occident in Anglophone Arab diasporic literature serves as an effort to counter the popular tales about the utopian “West” and the perpetuated “myth of the West” that many Arab people have embraced for centuries.

AlAmmar’s *Silence Is a Sense* and El Akkad’s *What Strange Paradise* address both the Orient and the Occident. These literary works initiate a tripartite dialogue among Arab readers, fictional characters, and the “West,” encouraging a reevaluation of entrenched images of the Occident as a promised land and shedding light on the adversities Arab immigrants and refugees face in Western societies. This is evident in AlAmmar’s exploration of her protagonist’s experiences of infra-humanization, insecurity, and stereotyping, as well as in El Akkad’s depiction of the suffering of refugee children and the impact of European anti-immigration policies on immigrants and refugees.

Contemporary Anglophone Arab diasporic writers recognize that many Arab people have been captivated by a glamorized image of the Occident for centuries. Their narratives aim to restructure and even deconstruct this image by presenting a more nuanced portrayal of the Occident. Accordingly, the new perspectives on Occidentalism offered by Anglophone Arab diasporic narratives can help bridge the gap between Arab immigrants’ and refugees’ idealized perceptions of the Occident and the starker, less acknowledged reality. Furthermore, as Occidentalism literature addresses both the Orient and the Occident simultaneously, it has the potential to foster intercultural dialogue by demystifying each side’s preconceived notions about the other.

6. Future Research

Future research could build on this study by exploring the manifestation of Occidentalism in other diasporic communities, such as South Asian, African, or Eastern European immigrant literature, to identify shared and unique experiences. Interdisciplinary approaches, incorporating sociology, political science, and psychology, could deepen the understanding of how Occidentalism interacts with themes such as trauma, identity, and cultural adaptation. Additionally, further studies might investigate the role of visual and digital narratives—such as film, photography, and social media—in shaping or contesting the “myth of the West.” Reader reception studies could also provide valuable insights into how Occidentalism literature is interpreted by diverse audiences, enriching discussions about its cultural and social significance. Finally, future research might examine generational perspectives, focusing on how second-generation Arab immigrants in the West grapple with inherited and experienced notions of the Occident, as well as gendered analyses to explore how men and women experience migration and Occidentalism differently.

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