

The Representation of the Grandmother in Arab American Fiction: Alia Younis's *the Night Counter* as a Case Study

Asmaa Belbachir^{1*}, Eman Mukattash¹.

¹The University of Jordan, Amman, Jordan.

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*Corresponding author:

The University of Jordan, Amman, Jordan.

Email: E.mukattash@ju.edu.jo.

Abstract

The increasing phenomenon of long-living grandparents and their novel roles and positions within both family and society in today's world has inspired authors to produce literary works that address this subject. This article, in turn, aims to offer a clear representation of the grandmother's character in Alia Younis's *The Night Counter* (2009) by analyzing the various roles that the grandmother's character plays in the lives of her grandchildren. As an Arab-American, Younis has an extensive background in the structure, norms, and values of the Arab Lebanese family, which are reflected in the novel. By choosing the grandmother as a central character, Younis highlights the vital role that the Arab grandmother plays in the lives of her American-born grandchildren. To achieve this, the article examines the multifaceted roles Fatima assumes as a surrogate mother and as a transmitter of native culture, as demonstrated in her relationships with her grandson Amir and her granddaughter Decimal. The analysis of these intergenerational relationships confirms the grandmother's role as a reservoir of cultural heritage in *The Night Counter* (2009), portrayed as someone who persistently intervenes to re-educate and redirect her grandchildren towards native culture and away from American culture, sometimes leading to tensions and conflicts between the two generations.

Keywords: Arab-American Literature, Grandmotherhood, Surrogate Mother, Cultural Mediator.

1. Introduction

Generally, scholars have noticed the higher quality relationships grandchildren have with their grandmothers than with their grandfathers through their multiple studies (Roberto & Stroes, 1992). At the same time, there are others who defy this hypothesis by arguing that grandmothers, too, have a negative influence on their families and grandchildren. Building on these diverse studies, this article seeks to reveal the multifaceted roles grandmothers perform in their families as manifested in Alia Younis' *The Night Counter* as both care-givers to their grandchildren during their infancy and cultural mediators when they mature.

The significance of this study arises from its attempt to uncover the representations of grandmothers in Anglophone Arab fiction, precisely Arab-American. Its importance lies in its contribution to link family studies with Arab diaspora studies in order to analyze the changing

roles grandmothers play in the lives of their grandchildren within their extended families in diaspora. Since Arab-American grandchildren rely on their ancestors' reproduction of Arab homelands from memory as the primary site through which they come in contact with it before experiencing a temporal return journey to the country of origin (Fadda-Conrey, 2014), the study equally deploys intergenerational studies to analyze grandmother-grandchildren relationships within Arab families living in the USA to assess the extent to which the grandmothers' native culture can influence the grandchildren, specifically their indulgence in the host culture.

1.1 Literature Review

The spread of multigenerational families and extended ties among ethnic minorities has generated the urge to study intergenerational relationships and interconnections among family members including the grandparent-grandchild relationship. Chen et al. (2011) note that the twenty-first century has witnessed an increasing importance of intergenerational ties at the economic level, as it has become central to the individual's life despite the shift toward the nuclear family and marital instability (01). In a similar study, Strauss C. Ann (1996) dictates a list of grandparental universal models amongst which are the following: family historians, storytellers, and carriers of cultural or ethnic traditions and family heritage. They perform a surrogate parenting role in case of parents' work, single parenting, divorce or teenage pregnancy (x). As this study is concerned with the role of the grandmother, the discussion below will show her responsibility as a care-giver for the newborn grandchildren, which requires affection and her role as an ambassador of the native culture which necessitates determination. Therefore, her attitude fluctuates between being affective and loving at first, then nagging and strict, which results in a generational conflict.

To start with, studies highlight the role of grandmothers in connecting family members and point to "the familiar notion of women as 'kin-keepers' who, as 'ministers of the interior' place a lot of emphasis on maintaining interpersonal and family ties" (S. Harper and I. Ruicheva, 2010). Therefore, grandmothers are expected to play pivotal roles in families as "a part of women's collective responsibility for relative and nonrelative children" (Bertera and Crewe, 2013). Nowadays, caregiver grandmothers, custodial grandmothers and surrogate mothers are the roles of grandmothers which recent studies have started to focus on. They reveal that the grandmother's involvement in child rearing and caregiving influences the grandchild's behaviour positively, especially during his early years. Barnett et al. (2010) highlight this idea in their article "Grandmother Involvement as a Protective Factor for Early Childhood Social Adjustment" in which they argue that the presence or absence of a grandmother in the life of three-to-five-year-old children has an impact on the degree of his externalized behaviours (635). Thus, the presence of the grandmother offers multiple benefits to family members as she guarantees stable lives for her grandchildren by maintaining family and cultural values and providing a safe environment, precisely in ethnic societies (Gibson, 2014).

More specifically, Gibson (2014) points to the role of African-American grandmothers as caregivers which they consider as an obligation and expectation rather than a burden (02). In the same vein, Michel et al. (2019) devote their article "The Role of Grandmothers in African societies" to honor African grandmothers due to their multifunctional roles in the collectivist African society. The scholars focalize on the diverse roles of grandmothers as "Herbalists", "The Faith Champions", "The Agriculturalists", "The Family Educators", "The Economists", "The Perfect Babysitters", "The Family Chefs", "The Family Nurses", "The Midwives" and last but not least "The Orphan Advocates" (2-6). This long list of the functions assigned to grandmothers in Africa, which is a model of an entrenched traditional collectivist community, stresses her value as

an active member of the family who should not be deserted or sent to the nursing homes. Despite their aging bodies and physical decline, grandmothers find themselves engaged in raising their grandchildren, especially in cases of the parents' absence.

1.2 Grandmothers in Arab-American Families

The reference to Diaspora studies is an important step before zooming on Arab-American matters among which grandmotherhood is an integral issue. As a matter of fact, scholars associate the relationship between culture, identity, and the homeland with their investigation of dispersed communities to construct a better understanding of diaspora. According to Avtar Brah (1996), culture can be defined as the embodiment, the chronicle of a group's history. In the same vein, Hem Raj Kafle (2010) draws on Cohen's, Tölölyan's and Safran's discussion on the features of Diaspora in "Diaspora studies: Roots and critical dimensions". First, Cohen (1997) stresses "a strong ethnic group consciousness based on a common history and belief in a common fate" as a feature of a diaspora community. Then, Tölölyan affirms that "Diasporic communities actively maintain or construct a collective memory, which forms a fundamental element of their identity" (Tölölyan, 1996). Moreover, Safran (1991) points to diaspora communities idealized ancestral home which they believe "all members of the diaspora should be committed to [its] maintenance or restoration". As a result, the family elders in Arab-American community are expected to uphold ethnic traditions and to transmit them to their successors in an attempt to preserve native heritage across generations (Beitin & Aprahamian, 2013). Arab-Americans have also maintained native attitudes toward gender roles after moving to America and implanted them in the next generations. Ajrouch (1999), for instance, argues in "Family and Ethnic Identity in An Arab-American Community" that Arab women represent the embodiment of ethnic heritage which anchors the group's sense of identity in Arab-American families (138). Building on Ajrouch's argument, grandmothers represented as old wise Arab women, are qualified enough to embody their ethnic heritage and maintain their native culture among their families. This explains why the figure of the grandmother in Arab-American literary works usually is perceived as a reflection of the mother land. In her thesis "Imagining Sittee: Constructions of Homelands and Grandmother Narratives in Arab American Literature", Nora Eltahawy (2010) dwells on this point explaining that through the lens of diaspora studies, the figure of the grandmother becomes "integral in the creation of an Arab-American imagined community in which the homeland becomes the motherland" (Eltahawy, 2010). This study, in this regard, stresses the previous vision of diaspora studies by examining the role of grandmothers as the embodiment of ethnic heritage in Younis's *the Night Counter*.

The previous arguments turn to be reliable references in the analyses of Younis's *the Night Counter*, where the role of the grandmother Fatima manifests as a surrogate mother to her grandson Amir from one side, and a source of the Lebanese culture to her great granddaughter Decimal. As a matter of fact, *The Night Counter* has remarkably won tribute since its publication in 2009. Most of its reviews point to the implication of Scheherazad as a character in the novel. In "Re-Encountering Scheherazade: Gender, Cultural Mobility, and Narrative Transformations in Alia Yunis' *The Night Counter*", for example, H. Vinson (2014) explores the manner the author evokes the heroine of *Arabian Nights*. The researcher suggests that in addition to its counter narrative trend, the novel "promotes a type of 'coming out' that embraces the plurality of Arab-American stories and modes of belonging" (56). Moreover, in "Mirroring Hybridity: The use of Arab Folk Tradition in Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* and Alia Yunis's *The Night Counter*", Hilal (2020) investigates how Younis and Halabi utilize cultural signifiers such as Arab folk tradition

and storytelling structures to reverse the positionality of the Arab and Muslim community which has been marked by Otherness after the events of September 11th (251).

Building on the critical works reviewed above, this study promotes an additional criticism on *The Night Counter* and examines it through a different angle by mirroring the grandmother's experience in the diverse Arab-America. While previous researches have analyzed the current novel referring to its magical realistic events that defy Western stereotypical images, this study diverges to offer more focus on the figure of the grandmother. Building on the fact that the grandmother is the family holder, this article detects her roles and her relationships with her grandchildren in order to examine the fate of the extended Arab family in the USA and whether it resists the external culture and succeeds to unify or it fall apart into nuclear families and individual members. The current study also examines her roles as surrogate mother and a culture mediator to shed light on her influence on the grandchildren's lives.

2. The Grandmother as a Protagonist in Younis's *the Night Counter*

The crucial role the grandmother plays in the lives of her grandchildren in cases of immigration is a familiar motif in Arab diasporic literature, and this is made more obvious in the current roles of the grandmother figure in a range of works including Jonna Kaddi's anthology *Food For Our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists* (1994), Makdisi's memoir *Teta, Mother and Me: Three Generations of Arab Women* (2006). The former gathers second generation Arab American writers' experiences with their grandmothers whom they believe are the incarnation of their original homeland. Saliba (1994), for example, declares in her essay: "if a woman could be a land, then Sittee was Lebanon to me" (10). Mahoul (1994), likewise, associates her grandmother's life story with her homeland's history for she considers her a "timeless entity of Arab history" (27). Makdisi (2006), as well, enacts the same idea in her memoir where she devotes a whole section speaking for her Teta not only as an ordinary person's biography, but rather a life story full of pivotal historical occurrences marked by serial displacements. Authors of fictional works such as *The Girl in The Tangerine Scarf*, *The Inheritance of Exile*, *Somewhere, Home* and others, also insert the character of the grandmother in their narratives to assert her inextricable role in the Arab and Arab-American family. Younis's *The Night Counter*, in turn, succeeds to be a better example due to its author's selection of a Lebanese matriarch, who turns to be a grandmother, as a protagonist for her marvelous story.

The protagonist Fatima Abdullah is placed by Younis at the center of the story around whom the events revolve, and it is she who relates and speaks for herself and her children and grandchildren to Scheherazade, the most famous storyteller. This role rotation between the storyteller and the story listener is a remarkable tentative by Younis to voice the character of the grandmother, a very traditional Arab entity, in the midst of the individualistic American society. Thence, Jumana Bayah (2020) comments: "This is a pivotal reversal or inversion, which has been commented on particularly in relation to how narratives about our lives are constructed in a context of mobility and diaspora" (295). The latter is the framework of Younis's story in which Fatima keeps struggling due to cultural difference, while at the same time finding psychological rest with her Middle Eastern mate with whom she shares her worries and distress. For this reason, the author's inspiration by *The Arabian Nights* leads her to bring together a supernatural character, Scheherazade, and a true-to-life one, the grandmother Fatima. This association allows the reader to observe the transformation of the grandmother's inner thoughts and memories into verbal conversations and manifested real events. Younis (2013) points to the latter idea in her contribution

in *Scheherazade's Children*. As it is mentioned, the book is about “an older woman who shared the Middle East with her [Scheherazade] but had the struggles of America as the framework for her stories” (399). Needless to mention, the stories Fatima relate take place in different times and spaces which the reader can only observe through the magical flying carpet of Scheherazade. Her dynamic mobility from Lebanon in the East to America in the West, and from Fatima’s past childhood back to her present senility reveals a rich history of an immigrated grandmother. According to Pauline Homsy Vinson (2014):

In *The Night Counter*, the connection between what happens there and what happens here is shown to constitute an integral component of Arab American experience from the first waves of immigration from Mount Lebanon toward the end of the nineteenth century up through the more varied migration patterns of the present. (Re-encountering Scheherazade, 61)

The quote above highlights Younis’s reliance on her protagonist, the grandmother Fatima, to insert a phase of Lebanon’s history in her story by traveling to her childhood then projecting her first experience of immigration to the USA, and to shed light on Arab Americans’ different interactions with the American lifestyle through Fatima’s representation of each one of her children’s experiences.

To introduce Fatima’s role in representing the past (what happened there), the author remarks: “Those events had occurred in Fatima’s first seventeen years of life, which was the last time she had seen Lebanon and that house” (29). One of those events which has been the first step toward her immigration is her marriage to a man the age of her mother for being an American citizen with whom her mother has been sure Fatima would have a better life. It is worthy pointing out that whenever Fatima recalls a memory or tells about an incident from Deir Zeitoon to Scheherazade, she refers to a historical event which has occurred in the same period of time. For example, when she talks about her first husband Marwan’s age, she says: “Both she [her mother] and Marwan were born when Lebanon was starving because Britain and France had blockaded our harbors to defeat the Turks” (Younis, 2009). Also, when she reminisces about her first marriage, she mentions that it coincides with “The year the Palestinians started to rise against the British, and in Deir Zeitoon, everyone was already talking about getting the French to leave Lebanon” (Younis, 2009). It is clear, then, that the past of a grandmother and a family matriarch like Fatima is of serious importance in such a narrative. She helps like Makdisi’s and Mahoul’s grandmothers to provide the reader of the third and fourth generation immigrant, especially for those who have not had yet an access to Arab Middle Eastern countries with a complete background of her native land, culture, and history.

On the other side, Fatima amuses Scheherazade by narrating her story of a seventeen-year-old girl who has been alienated in a strange faraway land, illiterate and having no English and getting married to an old man, which was the first step to establish a new life in Detroit. After that, she narrates the stories of her children who have left Detroit to live their different destinies and experiences as Arab descendants in the other American cities. Therefore, the grandmother in this narrative, by offering these serial events, participates in the construction of a complete image of the “Arab American plurality” to borrow Salaita’s (2007). words. Vinson (2014), in turn, asserts that in the novel the Arab-American plurality is accentuated through the multiplicity of Fatima’s family stories which “produce a wealth of intersecting and bifurcating narratives” (62)

The standing point, here, is the remarkable role given to the character of the grandmother in *The Night Counter* as a link between the past and the present, the here and there. This is

translated through her childhood, the stories of her grandparents and family from Deir Zeitoon, the historical events she witnessed in the Arab region in addition to her immigration to Detroit and the stories of her children's multiple experiences in America. To note, recalling Fatima's past in the midst of an American setting is an endeavour to deconstruct the Western preconception of the far East. Nadine Naber (2012) explains that "The subjects of the current empire 'over there' also reside 'over here' within the empire itself" (60) to assert that the two geographies are strongly related by means of diasporic narrations. This value given to the character of the grandmother is Younis's instrument to unveil the grandmother's shadowed narratives and rescue her roles from invisibility by allowing her "to speak for the first time in the community's oeuvre" (Eltahawy, 2009), just like Scheherazade rescues her life by narrating stories to the caliph. Hence, the purpose of the narrative to unmute the grandmother's diasporic experience is attained through the voice of Scheherazade as a symbol of Middle Eastern culture. In this sense, Richard Gray (2011) claims: "These fictions resist the challenge of silence by deploying forms of speech...subverting the oppositional language of mainstream commentary" (17). Accordingly, the author, here, selects a traditional Middle Eastern figure to be a thought-provoking element which redirects interest to the Arab-American minority and voices the grandmother's untold words by flying and collecting her stories from the places they occur in. In this regard, Reem M. Hilal (2020) worthily mentions that

Alia Younis disrupts the dichotomy of the self and the threatening Other and by transporting characters from the folkloric traditions to the American literary landscape to demonstrate how Scheherazade, like the Arab and Muslim American experience, is firmly located in the American national narrative through the transfer of cultural symbols in the immigrant experience specifically and through global exchanges more generally emphasizes through the idea of cultural mobility (253).

From this standpoint, the grandmother Fatima and Scheherazade are two faces of the same coin in the way the author deploys their characters in the narrative to highlight the existence of Arab-American literature in the mainstream literary realm.

3. The Grandmother as a Surrogate Mother in Younis's *the Night Counter*

The role of grandmothers as surrogate mother has become a prevalent topic in recent approaches in intergenerational studies. After the spread of single mothers and lone parent phenomenon, grandmothers have found themselves obliged to share the responsibility of rearing their grandchildren with their daughters for sociocultural and socioeconomic reasons such as teenage pregnancy, divorce of the parents and parents 'work. Despite the availability of childcare institutions, lone parents prefer grandmothers to take care of their children and give them the priority to substitute their roles. This is mostly prevalent in extended families in which grandchildren have the opportunity to be brought up by a relative rather than a stranger. Mansilla-Dominguez et al. (2024) dwell on this idea in "The Role of Duty, Gender and Intergenerational Care in Grandmothers' Parenting of Grandchildren" claiming that "grandparents choose to care for rather than accept that their grandchildren be cared for by strangers and that grandmothers feel a deep-rooted sense of responsibility, family commitment and obligation when their children need outside help to rear the grandchildren" (Mansilla-Dominguez et al., 2024). However, it is not an easy task for them especially for old age and low income grandmothers as it is mentioned by Gibson (2014) who argues that "In this role, grandmothers are seen as sources of strength in African American families and the arrangement as family preservation despite problems that may result to them such as financial hardship and increases in chronic health conditions" (02).

The studies applied on non-Western collectivist societies reveal that they are different from Western societies in the way they privilege the extended family and value the roles of the grandmaternal involvement in child rearing. In “The influence of ecocultural contexts on Grandmaternal caregiving and Grandmother– Grandchild relationships”, Schmidt et al. (2021) point to the Middle East and North Africa among others as illustrations of the non-Western context in which “Many grandmothers live in multigenerational households and may share a room or co-sleep with grandchildren. They often perform a great range of caregiving responsibilities, either as primary caregivers or (most often) along with the mother and other extended family members” (03). It is also common in collectivist societies, including the Middle East, that the parents rely on their mothers to take care not only of their children’s nutrition and feeding but also their discipline and morals. Aubel (2023) points to the same idea in her article “Grandmothers – a cultural resource for women and children’s health and wellbeing across the life cycle” claiming that “Grandmothers participate in collective caring for women, children and adolescents; they participate in, or lead, decision-making related to their domains of expertise; and they are responsible for defining and enforcing social norms” (04). This makes clear that the role of grandmothers as surrogate mothers is not confined to primary responsibilities and daily care but expands to entrenching cultural values in the grandchild’s personality.

From this standpoint, the figure of the grandmother in literary diasporic, particularly Arab diaspora holds the responsibility of raising grandchildren in the traditional way to implant their native culture on their minds. Nevertheless, few Arab-American authors entail her role as a surrogate mother who replaces the biological mother by taking care of their children’s infants until they mature.

Younis’s *The Night Counter* stands as a suitable illustration of this for it portrays the character Fatima as a surrogate mother to her daughter’s son Amir whom she rears as a baby and continues guiding as an adult. This multifaceted role toward her grandchildren, precisely Amir, permits her to revive her maternal sense and practice again her role as a mother to compensate the first one that she has lost after the separation from her children.

Primarily, in *The Night Counter*, Younis (2009) foreshadows Fatima’s motherhood by representing her as a marginalized mother deserted by eight children who have left her only their childhood’s memories. The old mother, Fatima, has reached eighty-two years of age to find out that the “chubby-cheeked babies she had bathed in the laundry sink in Detroit” (345) have become adults scattered in USA’s districts “to escape their parents’ darkness” (295), as she justifies them to Scheherazade in the novel. The Lebanese matriarch realizes that the family she has built in Detroit is but a myth and the house that has gathered her, Ibrahim and their children has seized to be a real warm shelter. By then, she, in turn, has escaped the gloomy atmosphere of the Detroit house and divorced Ibrahim after feeling her death approximate to finally settle at Amir’s Los Angeles house. It is worth mentioning that moving to live with Amir is not an imposed decision that could be caused by Fatima’s disappointment with her children; rather she has different motives that urge her to choose her grandson over the others.

Above all, Amir is Fatima’s favorite grandson. Their relationship is not just a grandmother-grandchild relationship, though this one is not less valuable, but it goes deeper to be a mother-child relationship. She becomes his mother from the moment Soraya decides to quit him “leaving behind the boy whose future she always left in someone else’s hands someone who, for all Soraya has mocked her, made a much better mother, at least for Amir” (133). Apparently, this evokes a prevalent phenomenon among Arab-American families being part of the overall ethnic

communities in the USA which is the grandmother as a replacement of the mother. In the black-American community, for example, grandmothers substitute parental roles in case of the daughter's inability to perform motherhood whether because of illness or lack of experience (Harper & Ruicheva, 226). In the novel, Fatima substitutes her daughter Soraya who could not perform motherhood because of different reasons. Firstly, during their discussion of being emotionally parentless, Amir confesses to his kin Decimal that his mother has had him because her ex-husband was having a kid (283). Then, he continues revealing his mother's other reason as he says:

“...she didn't know how to support me_ at least that what she told me_ so she dumped me off with Tayta, and that was the best thing for all of us, according to my mom's first therapist. He said...without her finding herself I would have been lost” (Younis, 2009).

Fortunately, Amir has had the opportunity of having a more caring mother; Fatima who holds the responsibility instead. It is important to mention that Soraya admits Fatima's qualification to raise her baby boy because she knows that he is with a family member, not a stranger. This stresses the idea that in case of the mother's absence, the best childcare giver is his grandmother instead of a non-relative babysitter (Mansilla-Dominguez et al., 2024). Moreover, it reflects the mentality of collectivist societies which consider the grandmother as a surrogate mother. This is asserted by Gibson (2014) who claims that “The fact that in the African American community, women in their role as grandmothers also assumed an additional role of caregivers to their grandchildren and helpers to their adult children as a cultural tradition is not new” (08). Needless to mention, this cultural principal is not confined to African-Americans; rather it is a common characteristic among other ethnic- American minorities including the Middle East. This remark is likewise highlighted by Burton et.al. (1991) who argue that “Although these tasks are often considered synonymous with the family roles of black elderly, it is important to note that they are not exclusive to aged blacks but are performed by the elderly in other racial ethnic groups as well” (312). In this site, the author employs the trio of grandmother-mother-son in a complex manner in the selected novel to manifest one of the critical subjects in intergenerational relationship studies which is the grandmother as the replacement of the mother, especially in the case of the father's absence like Amir. Yet, Amir's father is unknown because he is a sperm donor whom Amir keeps looking for by asking Soraya about him at each time they meet. By integrating the issue of sperm donation in her narrative, Younis hits two birds with one stone: From one side, she removes the reticence from this subject which has been a taboo at the novel's publication time, at least for Middle Eastern and North African readers. From the other side, she points clearly to the freedom of American daughters of the Arab immigrants who are born in America and who choose assimilation as their lifestyle in favour of their ancestor's religion and culture. Soraya here stands as a suitable example of a daughter who neglects her parents' Lebanese traditions and penetrates the red lines of her culture and religion by experiencing the IVF (In vitro Fertilization) technique using a stranger's sperm to have a baby. In the same vein, Younis presents Fatima's role by pointing to her intention to console her grandson's missing identity. The author interrupts the gloomy mode of Amir's painful reality using the grandmother's naivety and sense of humor to form a type of comedy of errors. It appears when she cannot understand the IVF technology; so she calls her grandson “the miracle boy” and “the immaculate” because she thinks he has no earthly father (343). Vinson (2014) comments on this arguing that:

In Yunis's novel, the “aja'b and aghrab” revolve around a type of comedy of errors that has nothing to do with the world of the jinn or magic lamps, and everything to do with

representations of sexual and cultural identity in cross-cultural encounters between the Arab world and the United States”. (60)

This is manifested in the astonishing story of the fatherless Amir which is concluded in a type of comedy of errors as a result of Younis’s inspiration by *The Arabian Nights* where suspense and astonishment are highly prevalent. In addition to, in her attempt to be flexible, Fatima prefers to believe that Amir’s birth is a divine will instead of facing her daughter’s extreme freedom and tendency toward blind assimilation. Apparently, the novel is full of comic passages by which Fatima entertains the reader. One example is when Scheherazade doubts Fatima’s memory about the key place. She angrily says: “*Allah Yustur*. I know it is here. Do you think I imagined it here? You think I am crazy? Because you are the only crazy thing in my life other than my children. *Yallah* let us go” (Younis, 2009). This is a witty manner Younis employs to render Fatima’s miseries: her dementia expressed through her conversations with the invisible Scheherazade and her bad motherhood experience as subjects of mockery on her own words. Another example is when Fatima tries to describe the colour of her pair of blue pants to Decimal as ones “made of blue that looks like bad spaghetti”. By blue looking like spaghetti, she means corduroy but she is unable to pronounce the word. In this situation, the author presents Fatima’s limited vocabulary in the English language in a sarcastic way to point out that after all those years of living in America she is still not familiar with Western dishes the way she is familiar with Lebanese dishes such as grape leaves and *mujaddara*.

4. Fatima’s Relationship With her Grandchildren

4.1. Amir

As mentioned earlier, Amir and Fatima’s relationship is a mother-son relation rather than a grandmother-grandson one. This complex intergenerational relationship has its own advantages and inconveniences like all other types.

To start with, it is worth mentioning that Soraya is not the only child among Fatima’s children who chooses to assimilate. Randa, too, has escaped Detroit to distance herself and her family from anything that reminds her of her Arabic origin. Each one of her children has had an assimilation experience as a result of which Fatima has become an isolated matriarch. Her experience of raising a grandchild after getting older paves the way to reviving her sense of motherhood again. In “The Grandmother: A Problem in Child-Rearing”, Hermann Vollmer (1937) points out that “When the grandmother does not have to share with others the responsibility for the child, she savors anew the sensation of being a mother; she relives the central experience of a former period of life during which she stood at the zenith of her career as a woman” (380). The author perfectly visualizes this when she describes the moment Amir is born. “It was in Fatima’s arms, shrouded under her veil of purple hair, that her son finally had calmed down enough from his long trip out of her womb to fall asleep.” (134). Hence, from the first moment in his life, Fatima’s arms have been his shelter until he becomes an adult and chooses his path in turn. Noticeably, Fatima preference of Amir is highly apparent because Scheherazade remarks her preservation of his infancy toys rather than her daughters’ stuff. She says: “[I] got rid of the old stuff. That way Amir was able to have his own room with just his things” (297). This reveals the grandmother’s persistence on her grandson’s comfort which proves her quality of childcare.

It is obvious that Fatima too feels comfortable with her grandson more than any one of her relatives which is implemented in her will to spend her last days with him, “She wanted to be home with Amir by then, where she would feel comfortable dying.” (146). Dwelling on this point, studies

explain that, in certain cases, the grandchildren “can themselves have the role of a replacement partner, and a replacement family for the grandmothers” (HarperDPhil and Ruicheva, 2010), especially when they lose their partners or get sick. This is clearly apparent in Fatima and Amir’s relationship, which goes beyond an ordinary formal grandmother-grandson relationship. They act like partners who share the house, food, engaging in comic and serious conversations to evolve a strong reciprocal bond.

Although many scholars such as Hurlock (1985) assume that when the grandchild grows older, he becomes distanced from his grandparents (404-405), Younis (2009) characterizes Amir as a good care-giver to his old vulnerable grandmother for when he “placed a pill tray on her lap. There were so many to take. She didn’t want to take them anymore, but she didn’t want to alarm him, so she swallowed them dutifully. (08). His care-giving also includes the attempt to protect her from dangers of stereotypical vision toward Muslims after 9/11 by advising her to unveil. Homsy (2014) comments on this incident in the novel by explaining that: “To protect his grandmother from possible attacks, Amir advises her to distance herself from markers of Islam and so ironically recommends that she ‘covers’ herself by ‘uncovering’ her hair” (66). This explains the irony of Amir’s attempt to hide his grandmother’s Arab Muslim identity to protect her while she is working hard to impose it on him.

The strong attachment of Fatima with her grandson urges her to select him to inherit the house of Lebanon because “Her children somehow having ended up with their own thoughts and ideas did not make easy heirs” (Younis, 2009). Amir, however, is not really qualified enough to hold this responsibility for different reasons, among which is his sexual disorientation, his rare knowledge about Deir Zaytoon and his ignorance of the Arabic language. Yet, Fatima tries hard to rectify his bias through her own solutions during her last nine days.

In the last 992 days, she attended enough condolences to know exactly how she wanted her funeral to go. She would leave those instructions with Amir. More important she could no longer put off finding him a wife, preferably before she had to give him the funeral instructions. Equally important she had yet to choose a child to inherit her home in Lebanon, a home she had not seen in seven decades.” (Younis, 2009)

Fatima has to take care of these vital matters before she dies in order to rest in peace. Her persistence that Amir gets married to be qualified for her ancestors’ house pressures him with this heavy burden and creates a zone of conflict between the two. The generational conflict is fuelled as Fatima’s traditional mentality clashes with Amir’s Americanization and the messages from the culture of origin and the host culture became difficult to reconcile (Ling Xu et al., 2018), for it is harder for older immigrants like Fatima to understand the young ones’ exaggerated freedom, like Amir’s sexual bias, and to adapt to the foreign society because of their deeply entrenched traditional upbringing. As a result, throughout the novel, Amir shows an attitude of disobedience toward his grandmother. Even though his marriage is one of her last wishes before she dies, he does not realize it except when “for the first time in his life he heard his mother’s voice as wisdom in his head: you just have to tell her things that will make her think she is happy” (Younis, 2009). Moreover, Amir’s insistence on theatre provokes Fatima’s rage as she says: “Trying to be comedian now? Acting is not a ridiculous enough hobby. A natural-born computer engineer just wastes time. *Haram* sacrilege” (08). Therefore, her authority over him is shaken because he is no longer the newborn she has once reared. In this site, Vollmer (1937) explains that there are menaces that shake their relationship which could be resumed in the limited contact between the two parties and the maturity of the grandchild which reduces her authority over him.

4.2. Decimal (Aisha)

The Night Counter is a rich narrative of all types of Arab-Americans. The author of the book reveals her purpose behind including this vast range of characters 'stories and makes it clear that the Arab-American ethnic group like all communities consists of an amalgam of diversities; each one has his own life and story (kitab show, 2009). In "Diaspora and Multiculturalism in Reconstructing the Cultural Identity of Arabs in America", Noman (2019) agrees with this when he notes that "Arab-Americans have been viewed by the West as a monolithic population; yet recent studies have shown that the Arab-Americans are heterogeneous and of diverse culture" (56). After devoting a chapter to each character's story, Younis cleverly projects the Arab-American diversity in one character; Decimal, and delineates, at the same time, Fatima's cultural role in her life which constructs a relationship between them beyond their biological connection.

First of all, Decimal's identity is a mixture of more than one origin for she is the daughter of an African-American father and the granddaughter of Hala, Fatima's daughter, and a Chinese grandfather; Dr. Wang. Pauline Vinson describes her as a "multi-ethnic", "multi-religious", "multi-racial", and "transnational origins" character (Vinson, 2014). Since she has never met her great grandmother Fatima, she stands as a distant figure whose Arabness is exotic and needs to be discovered. The author inserts a handwritten letter to introduce Decimal to Fatima explicitly and to the reader implicitly. Hence, the great grandmother stands as a link between the great granddaughter and the reader. It is important to note that from the first time Decimal reaches Los Angeles, Amir "felt that they have a vibe thing going... They were both far more intelligent than the life choices they had made would indicate, both choosing to take care of people who should have been taking care of them" (Younis, 2009). For this reason, Decimal whose original name is Aisha decides to explore her Arab side through Fatima. Her access to Fatima's house offers her the opportunity to learn about Lebanon, through Fatima's past in Deir Zaytoon, the Arabic language and Islam.

As for Islam, the name "Aisha", like "Fatima", bears a significant religious and Arabic symbolization that she could only discover through her journey to Fatima. Before, she used to believe it has African origins, but when Amir corrects her, she recognizes it is the name of "The Prophet Mohammed's wife". She could barely know that Mohammed is the Prophet's name until Amir clarifies to her. He acknowledges, in turn, that "Fatima had taught him a lot about a book she couldn't even read" (Younis, 2009). The book here is the Holy Quran which Fatima also introduces to Decimal, turning her into a source of knowledge to both of them. In the same vein, Byers (2010) notes that "the aged hold a high status based on their knowledge of traditional practices and spiritual wisdom" as Fatima demonstrates the importance of grandmothers as educators of grandchildren (307).

Actually, the Holy Quran is Fatima's tool to teach Decimal Arabic as she could only teach her orally because she is illiterate. It is also a means to rectify her morals as Fatima states: "She [Decimal] a most terrible shame. *Aabe al-shoom*... that is why I must teach her as much Koran as possible while there is time" (296). Ads. M.M (2016) notes that exposing children to their native language facilitates familial closeness and relationships with individuals who share a heritage culture (03). This is obvious when Fatima's rage at Decimal disappears, and her curses turn to be praises when she sees her earnestness to learn the language and to teach it to her coming child. What is more impressive is that "It had taken Fatima's family three generations in America to birth someone who wanted to learn Arabic from her instead of despise her." (Younis, 2009). Moreover, the first word Fatima teaches to her great granddaughter is *Muftah* or key in Arabic by which she

initiates her narrations about Deir Zaytoon house; “Fatima paused and waited for Decimal to yawn or interrupt her as she comes to expect from her family at the mention of this house. But Decimal didn’t” (Younis, 2009). Fatima realizes that she is more obedient than Amir, that she regrets not raising her from the beginning to avoid becoming a single mom. This idea is confirmed by K. Beitin and Aprahamian (2014) who claim that “Identifying family values prevalent in the Arab world and their evolvement over time provide an important context for a better understanding of Arab American family patterns” (67). By then, their relationship becomes profound through their mutual conversations and their common points.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, *The Night Counter* is a narrative which offers a better understanding of the Arab-American family, the diversities implemented within this community and the role of the elderly as heads of their families, especially grandmothers. The analysis of this novel unveils a part of the representation of grandmothers in Arab-American literature since it delivers two principal roles they perform in the life of their successors. The first one is Fatima’s responsibility over Amir being his substitute mother which turns to have positive and negative effects, among which are the reciprocal caregiving and the intergenerational solidarity, and the practice of authority which results in a generational conflict between the two. The second discussed role is her cultural transmission to her multi-origin great granddaughter as she teaches her the morals, language and religion of the native country Lebanon. As Vinson (2014) remarks, “Like the fig tree, which managed to produce fruit after a long period of dormancy and multiple displacements, Arab American stories, Yunis’s novel suggests, can regenerate and flourish in multiple settings and on distant soils so long as they are nourished appropriately” (70). Equally, Fatima’s efforts to adjust her grandchildren and reunite her family have finally yielded just like the fig tree in her yard that has flourished as a symbol of continuity and re-erection though in a strange soil. Thus, in order to cope with recent topics in family studies and intergenerational studies, this article presents a significant contribution to Arab-American families’ scholarship as it deviates from traditional family studies which focus on the roles of mothers and fathers and their relationship with their children and paves the way for future research concerned with the role and status of grandmothers in Arab diasporic literature which focuses on second- and third-generation immigrants. Through analysing Yunis’s *the Night Counter* as a case study, this study has shown that Arab-American fiction represents the figure of the grandmother as an affectionate member of the family who is ready to offer her grandchildren support when they need care and help, and to show firmness when they underestimate ethnic traditions and culture.

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Ethical Declarations

This study was conducted in accordance with the principles of academic integrity and research ethics. Since the research did not involve human participants, there was no need for informed consent or other participant-related ethical procedures. However, all data sources and materials used in the research were handled responsibly and with due regard for intellectual

property rights. The research process adhered to the principles of accuracy, transparency, and reliability to ensure the integrity of the findings.

Data Availability Statement

The datasets collected and analyzed during this study are available from the researchers upon request.

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Conflict of Interest

The researchers declare no conflict of interest.

Author Contributions

- Asmaa Belbachir and Eman Mukattash conceptualized and designed the study, in addition to collecting and analyzing the data.
- The first draft of the manuscript was written by Asmaa Belbachir and Eman Mukattash.
- The researchers reviewed and edited the text and approved the final version for publication.

Consent for Publication

The researchers agree to submit this paper for publication and await the editorial decision after the peer-review process, agreeing to its publication. They also confirm that this work has not been previously published and has not been submitted to any other journal for consideration.

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