

TRACING ARAB AMERICAN FOOTSTEPS IN THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH LITERATURE

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Although Arab American literature has evolved gradually from the 1970s, it has remained less understood until the present day because it was not given much attention in the American academic circles. It is widely believed that the environment created by the Gulf Wars as well as the crazy suicide that destroyed the Twin Towers more commonly referred to as the September 11 attacks has steered in an era of profound Arab American writing. Clearly the September 11 attacks focused attention on the term ‘Arab American.’

According to Steven Salaita Arab Americans by definition are diverse and they include : Muslim (Shia and Sunni and Alawi and Isma’ili), Christian (Catholic and Orthodox , Anglican and Evangelical, and Mainline Protestant), Jewish (Orthodox and Conservative and Hraedi and Reform), Druze, Bahai, dual citizens of Israel and twenty two Arab nations, multi and monolingual , progressives and conservatives , assimilationists and nationalists , cosmopolitanists and pluralists, immigrants and fifth generation Americans .

Arab American literature and culture are many things, and perhaps it’s multitude trace back to the slow break-up of the Ottoman Empire, whose various people and languages, cultures and faiths echo the dazzling diversity of the new Arab American literature in the late twentieth and twenty first centuries. Arab American literature reflects the patterns of Arab American history.

In order to deeply understand the lives of Arab Americans in the States it is best to consult the work of Jen’an Ghazal Read, who states that Arab Americans have come to the U.S in distinct waves. Tanyss Ludescher states that Arab immigration to the U.S dates back to the end of the 19th century, and that Arab-American literature:

“mirrors the patterns of Arab American history, which scholars have traditionally divided into three phases, based on the three distinct waves of Arab immigrants who came to the U.S” (93)

The first wave of Arab immigrants in the United States ranges from 1880 until 1924, these early immigrants were mostly Lebanese, Syrians and Palestinians, who were known as Turks, because of the domination of the Ottoman Empire. These immigrants identified themselves as Syrians as they hated their Ottoman overseers. These people lacked educational and technical skills as well as the capital when they arrived from their home of origin to their host homes, they found work as itinerant peddlers, fanning across the country, and often living without shelter on roads. Among other items these young immigrants peddled religious goods, confectionaries and baked products which were often prepared by their wives. These people lived in squalid, overcrowded hovels, and gathered in residential colonies encouraging

intermarriage and associating themselves with people of the same sect and religion, while also embracing the American values. As it became clear that women and family were an economic asset, more and more men returned to the Middle East in order to get married and bring back to the States their wives and families. Overtime these immigrants saved money and began investing in small businesses.

The literary production of this wave was only restricted to publication of Arabic newspapers which were often sectarian, political and geared towards events in the Middle East. *Kawkab Amirka* (The Star of America) was the first Arabic-language newspaper established in North America, and which came into existence in New York in 1892. Naoum Mokarzal founded in 1898 a newspaper called *Al-Hoda* (Guidance). *Mir'at al-Gharb* (Mirror of the West) was founded in 1899 and voiced the Syrian Orthodox and anti-Ottoman Arabism. The Druze founded *Al Bayan* (The News) in 1910. These papers did not discourage the community's sectarian division, each claiming to be the best representative of its sect in this 'temporary' residence. On the other hand, these ethnic newspapers encouraged assimilation and good citizenship of Arab immigrants in the US. Lisa Suheir Majaj states, "living in a heavily assimilationist U.S context, the first wave of Arab American immigrants responded to pressures to assimilate while maintaining their Arab identity." Most of the literature produced during this phase reflected the process of assimilation.

The 'second wave of immigration' began after the World War II, the reason of immigration was a number of regional conflicts and political instability which was a result of the Palestinian catastrophe and the creation of the state of Israel (1948), the Arab – Israeli war (1967 and 1973), the civil wars in Yemen (1962) and Lebanon (1975), the Iran/ Iraq war (1980), the Israeli invasion of Lebanon (1982), the first Palestinian intifada (1987), the Iran/ Kuwait conflict and the Persian Gulf War(1991).

The immigrants were Palestinians who became homeless and stateless after the Arab Israeli War, in 1948, most of the people from the second wave were educated Muslims, who were also skilled professionals. Due of this higher level of education, these immigrants were more in contact with the events taking place in their homelands, unlike the Syrian Christians, and even identified themselves as Arabs.

According to Alixa Naff what accelerated the growth in the number of refugees was, the *Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965* which incorporated a professional preference clause that favoured skilled professionals over uneducated persons which led to an Arab brain drain which reached its peak in 1968 and 1971. This group was involved in nationalist movements and paid attention to the political events in their homelands. Ludescher states, "for the first time, Arab American organizations were formed to defend the Arab point of view and to combat negative stereotypes of Arabs in the popular press" (94). The Palestinian cause became the main concern of these Arab immigrants, regardless of their national background. The descendents of the first and second wave immigration joined forces and came together with the newly arrived countrymen in support of the Arab concerns and culture by forming a number of organisations, committees and introducing newspapers and publications that together defended the Arab concerns. These Arab American institutions included, The National Arab American Association (NAAA), the American Arab Anti Discriminatory Committee (AAADC) and the Arab American Institute (AAI) along with many other local organisations and committees.

Among these groups of immigrants, the existence of a specific literary group needs to be highlighted. The *Mahjar*, which in Arabic means “place of immigration”, refers to the works produced by immigrants in North and South America. In South America, the Mahjar was centered in Brazil and presented traditional and conservative features, and in North America, the group revolved around Kahlil Gibran. Besides Gibran, other prominent figures of this group were Ameen Rihani and Mikhail Naimy, and among their main themes were the:

“desperate need to escape the mundane materialism of the peddler lifestyle; admiration for American vitality and hatred of American materialism; a desire for reform in the Arab world; acute concern about international politics and the political survival of the homeland; an obsessive interest in East/West relations; and a desire to play the role of cultural intermediary.”(Ludescher 97)

Therefore, writers were basically concerned with a cultural and political transformation of the East, while spiritually changing the West, based on the teachings from the East. The importance of the Mahjar group lies in the fact that it is considered the first literary school in Arabic.

Ludescher and Majaj state that the defining moment in the history of Arab American literature came with the publication of two anthologies, a twenty-page collection called “*Wrapping the Grape Leaves: A Sheaf of Contemporary Arab-American Poets*” (1982), edited by Gregory Orfalea, and the larger and more comprehensive anthology, “*Grape Leaves: A Century of Arab-American Poetry*”(1988), edited by Orfalea and Sharif Elmusa. The importance of these anthologies is the fact that they made it possible for readers to get acquainted with Arab American writers, some of which are contemporary ones. Elmaz Abinader’s famous autobiography based on family journals and letters, “*Children of the Roojme : A Family’s Journey*”(1991), gave a realistic account of tyranny , war, famine, tedious family divisions and the pains of emigration. Arab-American literature really began to flourish in the middle of the 90’s when female writers voiced their opinion on persistent thorny issues such as identity crisis, diaspora , the homeland , new vision of a home, racism, class, hybridity, gender issues , xenophobia , ethnicity , sexuality , language, marginalisation, politics and sites of violence and oppression.

Abdalwahid Noman is her literary work, “*Woman Voice In The Arab American Literature*”(2015), narrows down a few landmark Arab American writers who include : Susan Abulhawa , Elmaz Abinader , Etel Adnan , Suheir Hammad , Salom Rizk , Laila Halaby , Laila Lalami , Fadia Faqir , Mona Simpson , Diana Abu Jaber , Mohja Kahf , Nad Elia , Nadine Naber , Hala Haksoud , Ibtisam Barkat , Helen Samhan , Naomi Shihab Nye, Lisa Suheir Majaj , Catherine Filloux , Randa Jarrar , Claire Messud, Evelyn Shakir , Samia Serageldin , Nathalie Handal , Patricia Sarrai, Alicia Erian, Barbara Nimri Aziz , Joanna Kadi , Pauline Kaldas , Susan Muaddi Darraj , Kathryn K. Abdul-Baki , Miriam Cooke, Alicia Erian , Leila Aboulela , Fadia Faqir , Ahdaf Soueif , Leila Ahmed , Samaa Abdurraqib , Barbara Stowasser , Azizah Al- Hibri , Suha Sabbagh , Reem Abdelhadi and Rabab Abdelhadi , Nada Elia and Nadine Naber amongst many more well known and highly embraced writers.

Arab American literature has been included in school curricula and many scholars around the world have dedicated their researches to it. Ludescher states that two factors highly contributed to the growth of Arab-American literature:

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“the first was the search for voices outside the traditional canon of Anglo American male literature, a search which led to the burgeoning interest in ethnic American writers. The second factor, like so many things in the Arab American community, was political. Recent events in the Arab world combined to raise the political consciousness and solidarity of the Arab American community.” (106)

Secondly, Arab American writers have tried to combat stereotypes regarding their community and have shown a connection to their roots and homelands. Besides, there was an increased interest in the Arab community after the happenings of 9/11. When it comes to the issues facing contemporary Arab American writers, their main concern is related to establish “what constitutes Arab-American literature” (106).

Ludescher points out several questions that these writers have to deal with nowadays, since the Arab-American group is extremely broad, such as:

“should Arab American writers focus on the Arab side of experience, emphasizing the traditions and values of the Arab world, or should they focus on the American side of experience, emphasizing American immigrant experience in the context of multiculturalism?” (106).

Therefore, it is known that the main issue facing Arab-Americans is related to constructing identities and positioning themselves amongst many possibilities. Because of this complex status occupied by Arab Americans in the States, these writers, face and address, in their works, these complicated identity issues.

Majaj, suggests that coalitions and negotiations between Arabs and other marginalized groups is a possible solution for the problem of Arab Americans, extends this need of connection to Arab American writers as well, through what she calls “literary negotiations” (Arab American Ethnicity 326). Majaj states, “contemporary Arab-American literature increasingly reflects the awareness of the need to forge connections beyond the insular boundaries of group identity” (Arab American Ethnicity 326). Therefore, as the critic believes, Arab American writers should not solely focus on ethnic themes, but should expand their concerns, since “Arab-American identity is not an end goal to be celebrated but a starting point from which to redefine and resituate concepts of identity, relationship and community” (“Arab American Ethnicity” 326). Thus, Majaj believes that literature can help in the articulation of identity issues in association with identity politics within other groups and communities.

Gregory Orfalea also highly regards the importance of Arab American writers to the improvement of the situation lived by these people in the States. Arab American fiction is making fascinating strides. The voice of people who bear the burden of a unique history in U.S is becoming more confident. It is confident enough to create a strong, at times joyful, more often agonizing linkage to the Arab world. “With American warships and armies splayed out across the entire Middle East hunting for the elusive Fountain of Terror – a complete reversal of those adventurers who came to the New World for the Fountain of Youth – we have something to say, something to get across that matters, something to stand for. It is called humanness. In any case, there has been no value – and a great deal of harm – in letting others say it for us.” (Orfalea 132)

Orfalea highlights the fact that other people have spoken on behalf of Arab Americans for too long, have caused damage, but now it is time for them to make their own voices be heard. He

is critical of the fact that the American government invades the Arab World with violent purposes, while the first Arabs who went to the States were in search of a better life, without harming the people who were already living there. Thus, he implies that Arab American writers, in the presence of this situation, need to speak their minds in favour of the Arabs. The newest generation of Arab American writers dates from the mid 1990's and the "fascinating strides" mentioned by Orfalea are also noticed by Ludescher, who calls attention to the fact that, Arab American literature has begun to be more accessible to the American audience in general, mainly through school curricula. She states: "In the last decade, in particular, the works of Arab-American writers were taught in the college curriculum, and conferences were held that were devoted specifically to Arab American literature"(105). Ludescher attributes this increasing attention to Arab American literature to two factors. The first one, she writes, is related to "the search for voices outside the traditional canon of Anglo-American male literature, a search which led to the burgeoning interest in ethnic American writers" (106). The other factor is political and has to do with the raising of awareness among the Arab-Americans. According to Ludescher, "recent events in the Arab world combined to raise the political consciousness and solidarity of the Arab-American community" (106) As a result of these two motivations, Arab American writers have been creating works of great literary value, and which contribute to a more faithful portrayal of their people, one which does not ignore the multiplicity of their experiences.

Through the power of their literary works these Arab American writers seek to replace conflicts and dominant prejudices by mutual understanding of difference. By unfolding their histories and sharing their stories and experiences, these writers aim at effective healing while connecting with other Americans and resisting prevalent stereotypes. The Arab American writers courageously take advantage of the media and social facilities available in their modernised host homes. Therefore, this further accelerates the development of Arab American writing in America as these writers issue magazines, newspapers, establish social and cultural organisations, give interviews and write blogs which perpetually talk about and bring to light community issues as well as women issues.

Recent years have seen a plethora of new novels, including Patricia Ward's *"The Bullet Collection"*, Laila Halaby's *"West of the Jordan"*, Diana Abu-Jaber's *"Crescent"*, Naomi Shihab Nye's young adult novel *"Going, Going"*, Rabih Alameddine's *"I, the Divine"*, Rawi Hage's *"The De Niro Game"*, Samia Serageldin's *"The Cairo House"* and Mohja Kahf's *"The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf"*. Striking in this newer literature is a willingness to address gender issues and sexuality with more openness than previously. The newest genre to emerge in Arab American letters is that of drama. An increasing number of Arab American playwrights are writing and producing plays, including Betty Shamieh, whose work has been produced off Broadway, and Jamil Khoury, co-founder of the Silk Road Theatre Project.

Arab-American writers of real distinction have emerged to embody and represent the rich and complex textures of Arab American and Arab life. With vibrant organizations like RAWI (*Radius of Arab-American Writers*), journals devoted to Arab-American arts and letters (such as *Mizna* and *Al-Jadid*), and presses like *Interlink* and *Syracuse University Press*, Arab American literature continues to build bridges between Arab literary and cultural traditions and American ones (through translation and original poetry), and address the depredations of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East. Arab-American writers will continue to play a key role in braking the

imperial temperament, simply by constantly reminding us that the machinations of power are neither distant nor without consequence.

In her article “Arab American Literature: Origins and Developments,” Lisa Suhair Majaj proposes that:

“Arab American authors increasingly demonstrate both the diversity of the Arab cultural roots on which they draw and the diverse ways in which these cultural roots play out in the U.S. For some, Arab American literature will always be about the narrative of leaving behind one identity and acquiring a new one. For others, Arab American literature takes its place on a global canvas, as one component of a worldwide Arab diaspora in which cultural ties can be reinvigorated. Arab American authors may disagree whether the past is something to recover, or to recover from, as Khaled Mattawa has put it. But what is clear is that Arab American ethnicity and expression is a matter not just of the past, but of the present and future.”

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