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Arab Anglophone Fiction: A New Voice in Post-9/11 America

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Abstract

This paper is a study of novels written by Arab American writers in an attempt to analyze how such works of fiction portray the life of Arab Americans in a post-9/11 America. The paper shows how Arab Americans deal with the consequences of 9/11, and it also reflects several other aspects that characterize Arab American writing as an emerging post-9/11 new voice. It investigates the role of Anglophone Arab fiction in paving the way for more intercultural understanding and attempting to de-orientalize the Arab. Some writers often try to negotiate with the American culture in order to arrive at an identity that incorporates multiple elements from both the culture of origin and the host culture. Hybrid and cosmopolitan in their approach, such writers also attempt to be cultural mediators, and they show growing concern about subverting the normative judgment and stereotypical images that have fixed the Arab American.

Key Words: Anglophone, Post-9/11, Hybridity, Identity.

Introduction

Arab Anglophone literature has been in existence for more than a century, but it only gained a wider recognition after the tragic incident of September 11, 2001. Since that time, there has been a dramatic increase in publication by Anglophone Arab writers. This literary burgeoning, as seen by Lisa Majaj, “reflects in part the shifting historical, social, and political contexts that have pushed



Anglophone Arab writers to the foreground, creating both new spaces for their voices and new urgencies of expression, as well as the flourishing creativity of these writers” (62). Due to such and many other factors, Arab Anglophone fiction came to the limelight with many emergent voices, expressing the anguish and the harsh experiences of Arabs in an attempt to talk back to and negotiate with the American culture.

Since colonial times, there have been many Arabic novels which were translated into English and contributed to introduce Arabic culture to the Western readers, but the Anglophone Arab novel is uniquely different in the sense that it encompasses various elements from the host literary tradition and culture as well as the literature and culture of its place of origin. In this regard, Zahia Salhi has also explained that such a hybrid literature is “neither entirely Arab nor fully English, but instead occupies a place where both home and host cultures converge, intersect, and even clash, resulting in a third culture”(qtd. in Syrine 7). Interestingly, it is this hybrid nature of the Anglophone Arab literature that makes it a promising literary and cultural field of research, not only for its minority status, but also because it would serve as a primal bridge of communication between the Americans and the Arab world in a time of ongoing conflict and tension growing between the two sides. Culturally blended, this fiction would provide the Western readers with fresh portrayal and authentic perspective originating from the Arab world, away from what has been transmitted to them through Orientalists’ works as well as manipulated media channels. Thus, in giving a vivid and authentic picture of the Arab world with its diverse cultural manifestations and its religious and political specificity, Arab Anglophone fiction is more likely to maximize the possibilities of constructing cross-cultural bridges between the West and the Arab world.

Arab Anglophone 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 West. For some, Arab Anglophone literature remains a domain that simply narrates leaving behind one identity and acquiring a new one. For many others, it seems to take a prominent place on a global scale, a major constituent of a worldwide Arab diaspora in which cultural ties can be revived. It is



this notion of ‘cultural ties’ which is of great interest today and which would promote cultural understanding. This is in light with what Layla Al Maleh stated about the capacity of Arab Anglophone writers in playing a crucial role in “disseminating through the wider world their images of hyphenated Arabs and of the Arab people as a whole, thereby fostering acceptance through understanding” (5). Such fiction that fuses foreign linguistic backgrounds with Arabic cultural contexts would, indeed, contribute to the reshaping of bridges of cross-cultural and trans-cultural dialogues away from political, geopolitical and socio-economic tensions.

My attempt is to examine the ways in which the works by authors of Arab origin reject the boundaries that once were drawn by Orientalists and to show how these works blur the distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’, ‘here’ and ‘there’. What I intend to do is to broaden the scope of current investigations by moving beyond the dilemma of 9/11, as in today’s globalized world, there is a need to know the “other” more closely and to promote mutual understanding between the two sides, rather than romanticizing and fossilizing Arab Anglophone fiction in the labyrinth of displacement, split identity, and exclusion. Thus, my attempt is to explore the extent to which Arab Anglophone writers employ literary strategies to subvert the stereotypes commonly associated with Arabs in the U.S, and how they look at the Arab American communities from within in order to examine some of the problems they encounter. For this purpose, I selected three novels *Once in a Promised Land* (2007) by Laila Halaby, *The Hakawati* (2008) by Rabih Alameddine and *The Night Counter* (2009) by Alia Yunis.

Home and Abroad: Perceptions and Cultural Interactions

What can be easily observed in Arab Anglophone fiction is that the concept of home has various articulations. It cannot be considered as a unified experience; it rather takes its shape as a consequence of the ongoing interactions between the present and past as well. Sara Ahmed states that “the definitions of home shift across a number of registers: home can mean where one usually lives, or it can mean where one’s family lives or it can mean one’s native country” (338). One may have multiple homes, as in the case of Laila Halaby, Rabih Alameddine, and Alia Yunis. In almost



all the works of fiction produced by Anglophone Arab writers, we come across various conceptualizations of 'home'. What one easily notices is that through the three phases of Arab immigration to the United States, 'home' was perceived differently. For the writers of the first phase of immigration, 'home' was not an issue of much significance. As Al Maleh explained, "they reflected in their works a sense of collective optimism, celebration, exultation, and there was a kind of 'metropolitan' hybridity ensconced in the heartland of both national and transnational citizenship, a hybridity that undoubtedly helped them negotiate the 'identity politics' of their place of origin and their chosen abode with less tensions than their successors" (4). Seemingly, there was no place for displacement and identity crisis in the literature they produced. The writers of that period, according to Al-Maleh, "maintained their balance amidst the disjunctions of temporal and spatial distance and to have preserved their dual allegiance" (4). In a way contrary to their successors, writers of such phase viewed the past and the present critically as they did not betray their cultural memories nor did they disclaim their past.

More than expected, the backlash of the horrific incident of 9/11 revived a strong sense of home and nostalgia among Arab American communities because of the increased stereotypical and biased representations of Islam and the Arab world in the media to the point of damaging the status, demonizing Islam, and distorting the self-image of the Arab population and Arab American community. In this regard, Orfalea has stated that "9/11 represents a crucial moment in Arab American history, as it subjected the Arab American community to an extreme visibility and gave rise to feelings of deep vulnerability" (312). Thus, we see fear, despair, anger as well as vulnerability reflected in the works by Arab American authors published after 9/11. Arabs, indeed, faced collective hysteria that destabilized their emotional state and, consequently, made them feel as if they were betrayed. They came to the United States to pursue their dreams, yet after 9/11 America became for Muslims and Arabs in particular a land of no promise. The horrific incident of 9/11 brought a sharp turn in the lives of Arab Americans. It was only at the wake of the 9/11 that they began to rethink and reconsider their home, and therefore, they gradually became fully aware of their Arab identities as they realized how monstrous America is, tricking immigrants and their



children into believing the American dream. What one realizes is the infatuation of America and embracing a comfortable American life style deceived many into nurturing a sense of American belonging. It was only the daily prejudice, suspicion, and downright racism after 9/11 that raised in them a sense of injustice and outrage which turned later into a nostalgic feeling.

It is in Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* that we find the tragedies of the 9/11 compel the characters to re-examine their past, allowing their memories to flash back and replay over and over again. In their post-9/11 life, the straight and narrow were not normal as they were before but curved and widened, leaving them paralyzed with disturbed minds. Salwa, the protagonist in the novel, recalls her grandmother's childhood tales trying to find meaning in them. When a customer came to the bank to deposit an amount of money, Salwa offered to serve that customer who never stopped staring at her. Out of no curiosity but suspicion, the customer asked Salwa where she was from. Salwa answered saying that she was from Jordan, but unfortunately the woman, who was the customer, flared up. "What does that mean?" "Does it mean that you will steal my money and blow up my world?" the customer burst out, leaving Salwa's desk and seeking somebody else's service. Apparently, the novel portrays the mistrust that surfaced overnight. Salwa was really numbed to realize that her dream and interest in her job all evaporated. Her husband, Jassim, kept assuring her that it would pass, as he was confident that it was momentary. But when he himself tasted the same bitterness, he began to rethink the matter over and over again:

Each day that Jassim had gone swimming since that fateful Tuesday when the planes hit, his mind had not cleared on entering the water but rather captures memories, mostly of home, and rolled them around for the duration of his swim. The memories were neither pleasant nor unpleasant; it was as though he had a stack of DVDs to review that could be seen only while he swam (Laila Halaby 62).

Though Jassim and Salwa are American citizens, this only augmented their agony. They could not handle this anymore, nor could they tolerate the violent racist actions that targeted them.



Salwa, even though she is a holder of an American passport, thinks about abandoning the United States. One can sense how severe the treatment against them was, and consequently home, for them, is the only home, as America turned to be sham. Tragedy made them re-examine their past and allow their memories to be revived.

On the contrary, writers, such as Rabih Alameddine and Alia Yunis, think of home in fluid and porous terms, a site of inhabitation, constant transformation, and mediation. While for other writers, home was of greater significance and their characters are usually set between the host culture and the culture of origin, home, for Rabih Almandine, triggers memories of history, civil war, loss and despair, and he, therefore, finds his America as a safe haven. In his novel *The Hakawati*, he crafted stories within stories with an aim to break the reader's preconceived ideas and rattle the misconceptions about the Middle East. Osama Al-Kharat, the protagonist in the novel, who has been living in the United States for years, returns to Lebanon to see his dying father. In the novel, there are a number of tales, anecdotes, and fables drawn from various sources, Quranic, Biblical, traditional and historical, and are all stitched altogether with humorous threads that grab the reader's fascination further. The author was capable to juxtapose both truth and fiction, delineating the misery of today's world and the sorrow of the ancient one. As the family reunites in Beirut to stand vigil at the dying father, Osama beguiles them with his stories which could be described as palliative, as they all gathered to ease the dying father. Through his stories, Osama proves that his stay in the United States, with all the mirth and wealth, could not erase his memory of his culture and heritage.

Alameddine goes deeper and deeper into the Arab ancient culture peeling a layer after layer, rather than deploying nostalgia and gloom. He dazzles the reader with stories of lust, adventure, murder, scandal, and war, all drawn from the Western and the Eastern traditions, a celebration of both civilizations that he intends to mark. He, in one way, shows how diverse the Middle East is. Rather than dispersing gloom, Alameddine's 'hakawati' thrills his audience with stories that picture



the complex Middle East. In another way, his perception of the world is macrocosmic rather than microcosmic.

In Alia Yunis' *The Night Counter*, the concept of home is also persistent, but, we observe a broader notion of home. For example, we see characters whose parents are troubled with the idea of assimilation. Fatima, the grandmother, realizes that some of her daughters' children fit well in the American culture and show no interest in exploring the idea of home. The later generations of Fatima's family seem to be more reluctant to accept the idea of one home. Fatima and Ibrahim, her ex-husband, used to speak to them in Arabic, yet they respond in English, an indication of their reluctance to accept the language and culture of their parents. On the contrary, even though some characters in the novel had desire to assimilate, their attempts raised absurd contradictions. We see Randa, Fatima's daughter, with her pathetic attempts to establish an American identity. She moves to Texas, dyes her hair blonde, and changes her name to Randy, and persuades her husband Bashar to change his name into "Bud". Trying to demonstrate her "Americanness", Randa also offered to work for the FBI and told her family that she and Bud didn't want anyone to think that they were terrorists. In the same way, Amir thinks that he is an American in all sorts, as he is gay. On the contrary, Nadia and Elias, Zade's parents seem to be interested in pursuing a different perspective. Both are professors and used to teach Arab things mostly to Arab kids. After 9/11, their classes became full as there were many people who want to learn about the Middle East. They embraced their culture, and this encouraged their son to open a café under the name Scheherazade's Diwan Café, which became a cultural centre for Arab Americans, a place where they can smoke hookahs and enjoy sipping cardamom coffee.

Fatima brought something of Lebanon to America to remind her of her home. She brought seeds and planted them there, creating a Lebanese garden in Detroit with the seeds of her grandmother's garden in Lebanon. Arab food and smoking hookah are also pictures of home. Feeling that she has only some days left in her life, Fatima tirelessly attempts to convince Amir, her



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grandson, to accept her bequeathal of her house in Lebanon and also her other possessions, such as photos, wedding dress, and letters from her mother.

In Alia Yunis' novel *The Night Counter*, the characters of the novel offer a new dimension to the ongoing discussions and theories on diaspora by offering a new concept of home. Her novel centers on the life of Arab American characters in the United States. She gives an authentic portrayal of Arab Americans' everyday life, Arabian food, costumes, tradition, and what constitutes the makeup of Arab community. The characters are not troubled with the concept of home, yet their issues are all concerned about how to come to terms with the American culture, while also being Arab. As diasporic persons living between homes and identities, they realize the significance of the acceptance of their in-betweenness, thus reconciliation with having no home. Such realization brings out their celebration of non-belonging to any particular home. The concept of home for them remains fluid and constructed as a process rather than a place. This is what Lisa Majaj found out in her analysis of basic themes and concepts in Arab American literature. She concludes that in the case of hyphenated identities like Arab Americans accepting either side of the hyphen as the sole place of belonging is not the solution (10). She argues that "what is needed is the ability to move with fluidity between worlds" (10). Indeed, feeling of the celebration of non-belonging to any home, culture or identity, is what permeates Alia Yunis' novel *The Night Counter* and Rabih Alameddine's *The Hakawati*. In both novels, home is a history and perceiving diaspora is no more as a negative but a positive value. The central point is that having no home to belong to appears to bring about changes and transformation at the financial, educational and cultural levels. The characters in *The Night Counter* attempt to create a home within themselves, and thus construct a fluid and liberating homeland with a transformative agendas. Most of the characters in *The Night Counter* are born, raised, and educated in the United States. It is, therefore, not easy to expect them to denounce their American identity, nor is it possible for them to accept a full Arab identity. In this case, I think maintaining a hybrid identity would resolve the tension.



It is obvious that after 9/11 some Arab American writers initiated the move towards cultural understanding. Alia Yunis, for instance, in her novel *The Night Counter*, offers an intercultural mobile text that draws its energy from the life-sustaining art of storytelling of Scheherazade even as it reconfigures her tales in a comedic fashion that alters their significance for Arabs in America. The novel in a charming way provides us with disruptive appropriations as well as cultural relocations. By adopting redemptive strategies, anti-nostalgic and celebratory embrace of various cultural flows that make up Arab American plurality, Alia Yunis intends to mitigate the ongoing tensions within and between both Arab and American realities. The intersecting stories that she weaves in her novel open a space for producing new intercultural understandings through the mobile flow of people between and across multiple and intersecting sites of identification and cultural expression. Hence, Alia Yunis offers us a trans-cultural narrative that does not only encompass the techniques form *The Arabian Nights* but also attempts to reverse the Orientalist image of Arabs in the United States from potential terrorism suspects into mere fictional representations.

In *The Hakawati*, Rabih Alameddine shows much concern about subverting the Orientalist discourse which is based on the East-West dichotomy. In his novel, he focuses on the commonalities of the two sides, finding himself trapped in-between two different and at the same time similar worlds. In his novel *The Hakawati*, Alameddine invokes many narrators, interlinks plots, employs various genres and styles, and makes up a novel with mixed and different storylines. He seems to be struggling hard to tell “his-story” about American homophobia, Lebanese sectarianism and also the outcomes of civil war. For Alameddine; “Once the story was told, it was “anyone’s,” it became “common currency,” it got “twisted and distorted,” for “no story is told the same way twice or in quite the same words” (Rabih Alameddine 137).

Moreover, by mixing the storytelling of his novel, Alameddine is creating a sense of distrust and also disbelief in the reader. It is all mere fictional construction primarily meant for entertainment. The motif of survival in the *Arabian Nights* is reflected in the three novels. They all tell stories and suggest storytelling for survival. For Arab Americans, therefore, the idea is that, like



Scheherazade, if you have a good story, you can survive. They attempt to create history by telling their stories.

Most literary critics tend to look at Arab American writers in a way that attempts to place them in the category of culture/identity politics, and also their attitudes towards either identification or non-identification with the culture of their home countries. Laila Halaby, Alameddine, and Alia Yunis do not really lend themselves to such categorizations. In their narratives, they all display cosmopolitan or hybrid characters. Their novels propose a different kind of reading and they solely aim at creating new modes of discourse in opposition to the Orientalist discourse. Their fiction is less nostalgic, yet emphasizing intercultural mobility. Their conceptualization of home is fluid, and thus, they show willingness to embrace different cultures. Their characters transgress the boundaries and resist confinement, as they feel joy in mobility and freedom. More importantly, the drastic situation in the Middle East, particularly in the last few years, makes it difficult for anyone to even dream of a peaceful life. Their obsession with stories reflects their interest in their history, but they also cling to their Americannes. Alameddine does not accept the East versus West polarity; he rather turns it into a fiction. For him, it is nothing else but a work of fiction. In his style, Alameddine is a postmodernist. The fragmentations and frequent interruptions in *The Hakawati* are indicative of the author's conception of this world. In his novel, he creates a literary cuisine in which mixed characters residing in various geographies are postmodern catering to different tastes.

Mostly depicting the reactions of Arab Americans to 9/11 attacks, post-9/11 fiction charts the Arab Americans' responses to such a horrific incident which wreaked a severe backlash on all Arabs/Muslims. Post-9/11 writers produced magnificent and unprecedented works of fiction that are replete with multiple voices and numerous narrative techniques. Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land*, Rabid Alameddine's *The Hakawati*, and Alia Yunis' *The Night Counter* are just a few examples which went deeper into the psyche as well as reflected the various different shades of the lives of Arab Americans in the United States.



Conclusion

The paper is an attempt to explore how Arab American writers incorporate the ‘realities’ imposed after 9/11 into their narratives, and how they define and propose intercultural understanding. Arab American novels are mostly counter-narratives, yet they construct fluid and porous perceptions of home, even though they resort in times of tragedy to imagining an idealized home through memories of the past. They also reflect the different realities imposed upon them in a post-9/11 America, hyper-visibility and otherness. It is observed that the attitudes of the first generation differ from those of younger generations, as the first generation emphasized that they had maintained their ‘authentic’ Arabness, while the later generations easily identify with American language and cultures. Writers, such as Rabih Alameddine and Alia Yunis, attempt to introduce themselves as bridge-builders and cultural mediators. Their fiction deploys anti-nostalgic narratives, and they are not obsessed with the bygone times which are very prominent in the works of some ethnic writers, especially those writers who write about their present life in the host country. Though they let their memories flash back and retrieve images of their homelands, they are less motivated to idealize their countries of origin. Writing in English, these writers introduce Arab traditions, cultures, and customs to a wide range of western readership. Not only this, but they also combine elements of other cultures in their works, creating multi-cultural atmosphere.

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