

Representation of the Arab Exile in Arab American Literature

تمثيل المنفى العربي في الأدب العربي الأميركي

Faiza Hairech

Abdel Hamid Ibn Badis University of Mostaganem

haichifaiza@hotmail.fr

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Abstract: Exile, as a state of being, harks back to the existence of humankind, as natural misfortunes were the very first reasons behind one's displacement in their quest for survival. Exiles could be viewed as a state of those who were obliged to flee their homelands due to political persecutions; economic issues as well as religious clashes. The exiles focused upon in this paper are Arabs. This humble research attempts to track the representation of Arab American exiles in Arab American literature, from El Mahjar to post-9/11 literature. The approach this paper relies upon is a postcolonial reading. Arab exiles' representation in Arab American literature varies from that of devout nationalists and cultural mediators to literary militants, having as a mission to free the Arab psyche from the guilt of terrorism that torments it.

Keywords: Arab American literature; diaspora; exile; minor literature; representation.

ملخص:

يعتبر أدب المنفى محور إشكالية للبحوث الأكاديمية إذ أنه متشابك بين أدب المنفى في المكان وأدب المنفى عن المكان، و المنفى بتعريفه البالغ هو حالة من حالات وجود البشرية حيث كانت الطبيعة من أول الأسباب وراء نزوح الإنسان سعياً إلى تحسين أوضاعه سواء كانت مادية أو سيكولوجية. المنفيون هم أولئك الذين اضطروا إلى ترك أوطانهم بسبب الاضطهادات السياسية، الاقتصادية، والدينية. كما يمكن أن يكونوا من الذين هاجروا طوعاً إلى وجهات مجهولة بحثاً عن مكان أفضل للعيش. في هذا المقال نتطرق إلى موضوع المنفيين العرب إلى الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية. كما نتعقب كيفية تصويرهم في الأدب العربي الأمريكي منذ انشاء الرابطة القلمية إلى الأدب ما بعد أحداث 11 سبتمبر، والمنهج المتناول في هذه الدراسة هو مقارنة ما بعد الكولونيالية. يتباين تصوير المنفيين العرب في الأدب العربي الأمريكي من تمثيلهم كقوميين، وسطاء حضاريين إلى نشطاء أدبيين يحملون على عاتقهم مهمة تحرير الشخصية العربية من مجموعة الصور النمطية، على رأسها الإرهاب. كلمات مفتاحية: الأدب العربي الأمريكي، المهجر، المنفى، الأدب القاصر، التمثيل الأدبي.

Corresponding author: Faiza Hairech, e-mail: haichifaiza@hotmail.fr

1. INTRODUCTION

Arab American literature, as recently over spotlighted area of study, tackles several themes that are tightly related to the status quo of the Arab world in general and the current Arab American landscape in particular. Homesickness, nationalism, Terrorism, Islamism, exile, and diaspora are the recurrent themes tackled by Arab American writers. Writers like Amine Rihani, Khalil Gibran Sam Hamoud, Naomi Shihab Nye, Mohja Kahf, Laila Lalami, and Randa Djarrar, to list but a handful, have determinedly endeavored to present a realistic representation of their place of origin, namely the East. In so doing, these writers, whom I would consider as ambassadors of their cultures, try to restore the bleak image marketed, by the western media, as the genuine reflection of the Arab identity.

In this article, I plan to track the representation of exiles in the Arab American literature throughout time, from Al Mahjar to the post 9/11 literature, passing through the post-1960 literary period. However, before studying The Arab American literary production, I opt, first and foremost, to define who the Arab Americans exiles are.

2. Who Are the Arab American Exiles?

Arabs' existence in the New World is not a new one. In a historical account, Alvar Nunez Cabeza de Vaca reported that among the explorers who took part in the 1527 Spaniard ill-fated expedition was a Moroccan slave called Esteban, a moor who could survive, with only three Spaniards, despite the horrific natural as well as human-made misfortune (Cabeza de Vaca, 2002). Hence, Moroccans can be considered as white Americans as Sarno (2018, p. 1) states:

“One fact about the Arab existence on the American soil is that as early as the 15th Century, Spanish explorers brought slaves from the Arab world to the Americas. In the late 18th Century, the South Carolina House of Representatives decided that Moroccan Arabs living in the state should be treated according to the laws for whites, not the laws for blacks from Africa.”

Arab American migration to the US multiplied in the period named the Great Migration that lasted from 1880 to 1924. In this era, the number of immigrants to America exceeded twenty million, most of whom originated from the southern and eastern regions of Europe. However, Arabs outnumbered 95,000, most of whom came from Greater Syria. The number of Arab Immigrants to the United States reached approximately 200000 by 1924 (Sarno, 2018).

The drastic quantitative increase of the Immigrants after the Great Migration period caused a counter effect to the flow of migration to the United States, notably Arab Emigration that was deemed exotic and un-American by anti-migrant groups. Americans who wanted to end emigration accused the Arab migrants of not being able to understand The United States' policy and of being potential criminals. Anti-emigrants organizations strengthened and subsequently led the Congress to pass a set of laws in 1917, 1921, and 1924, which caused the process of Arab emigration to drastically slow down until the 1960s, when emigration revitalized. (Sarno, 2018)

Arab emigrants to the US were not all the same. A group of them intended to settle i.e., they brought their families and started their new lives in America. Howbeit, another group contained single men who only came for work and who intended to return to their home countries. Some of the groups mentioned above chose to cluster in certain towns; whereas, others did not mind to move to any other cities in America. As Such, these groups took part in both The American and the Arab American histories (Sarno, 2018).

After the 1960s, new waves of Arab immigrants landed in America; however, most of the newcomers were Muslim intellectuals. They were more politically aware than their predecessors were. Later, In 1990s census, statistics revealed that the Majority of Arab Americans(82 percent) were naturalized, though most of them(63 percent) were not born in the United States (Sarno, 2018), Giving birth to the Arab community in America.

Despite the fact that Arab Americans came from different geographical as well as religious backgrounds, their primary concern was to restore and preserve the identity of Arabs as one entity regardless of any differences. In the following section, I intend to give a short overview of Arab American Literature and to track the representation of Arab exiles in this prominent and thriving literature.

3. The Portrayal of Exile in Arab American Literature

Based on the chronology of Arabs' existence in America, I see it logical to divide the history of Arab American literature into three significant literary

periods. The earliest is the literature of the first generation of Arab emigrants to the US, which corresponds to El Mahjar literature. The second is the literature that followed the coming of several waves of emigrants to America in 1960. The third is the Post-9/11 literature eponymous of the tragic events that were a turning point in the history of Arabs in general, and Arab Americans in particular

3.1. Exile in Al Mahjar Literature

Arab American literature's start hacks back to the beginning of the Twentieth century as the literary organization "Al Rabita al Qalamia"(the Pen League) was established by Ameen Rihani, Khalil Gibran and few others. They created what is called the Mahjar school of Arab-American Writings using Arabic and English in their texts. In other words, the Arab American literary pioneers had written first in their mother tongue before they wrote in the language of their host country, the US. Ameen Rihani, for instance, was already an established writer in Arabic before he started his literary journey in English. He wrote a myriad of articles, short stories and poems, which boosted his reputation as a literary man (Hassan, 2011)

The impact of these writers on Arab American literature was tremendous since the very first novel, *The Book Of Khalid* (1921); poetry collection, *Myrthle* and *Myrrh*(1905); and play, *Wajdah*(1909) were written genuinely in English by Ameen Rihani. Adding to this, Rihani was the first Arab to translate an Arabic Poetry into English. Also important is the fact that he was the first Arab to write his literary critiques in English (Hassan, 2011).

Using his talent of writing in both, Arabic and English, Rihani launched a project of culturally translating both western and eastern worlds in an attempt to reinterpret the two divides of the globe to each other anew. In so doing, the writer, through synthesizing the two distinct civilizations, aimed at bridging the gap between the two worlds. Furthermore, he struggled to serving his primary cause which is to free the Arab world from the specter of colonialism and to reach a political unity. (Hassan, 2011)

In addition to Rihani, Gibran was an Icon of Arab American Literature in that his writings reached a huge readership, notably his book *The Prophet* (Abderrahmen Rejeb, 2014). In this regard, Rejeb further states :

There is an enigma called Gibran. Since 1923, Gibran has earned a global renown through his book "*The prophet*". A small book of

26 poetic essays and a best-selling book of popular mysticism, “*The prophet*” and many other Gibran’s works were translated into more than a dozen languages. Sales of “*The prophet*” have recorded more than 9 million copies in the United States to let him among the third best-selling poet behind *Shakespeare* and *Laoz*. (2014, p. 2)

The Arab writer’s stellar literary production inspired many American celebrities like the president John Kennedy who adopted Gibran’s words in his most Known speech: “*And so my fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.*”(Cited in Rejeb, 2014. P, 2) Also worth mentioning is that the Beatles’ song *Julia* was inspired from Gibran’s works (Rejeb, 2014) .

As a leader, among others, of The pen League, Gibran brought a lot to the Arab Literary realm, in that he adopted Western modes of writings as he was influenced by writers like Freiderich Nietzsche and William Blake(the English Poet) (Rajeb, 2014). In fact, it is this very cultural and linguistic diversity that make of Gibran the most apt to bridge the communicational gap between the two divides of the globe, namely the West and the East.

Gibrane, Rihani and their contemporaries sought, not only to bridge East to West, but they also aimed at positioning themselves, in the New World, as civilized intellectuals, and at freeing themselves from the Orientalist stereotypes that portrays them as exotic and barbarian (Majaj, 2008). Other writers, like Abraham Mitrie, Rihbany and Salom Rizk, used a self-distancing strategy that helped them to stand away from any elements of Arab culture, mostly from Islam. Instead they fore grounded their Christian faith in an attempt to gaining the American readers’ sympathy, and familiarizing the exotic. (Majaj,2008)

The founders of Arab American Literature expressed a national consciousness in their literary artifacts. To them, the exiled experienced a new situation in an alien territory, a territory that gave them new spaces to sound their individual and collective concerns without constraints. Besides the national consciousness that permeated the works of Arab American literary fathers, the mediation between the two divides of the globe was another concern of their writings. In this respect, Al Maleh (2009, p. 4) states:

They were the first real cultural mediators between East and West, finding themselves as they did in the conciliatory position of being able, through the medium of English, to

dispel misgivings about each culture and establish genuine intellectual rapprochement between the two traditions.

Another point which I see worth mentioning is that el Mahjar writers wanted to break up with orientalist premises that haunted their spirits. In other words, Arab American writers endeavored to resist the Orientalist machine that generated a colonial discourse by subverting the '*major*' language of their host countries, namely English. In so doing, they challenged the norms of both Arabic and American literary traditions in an attempt to disturb the reader's scheme and stimulate his/her curiosity to know about the '*Other*'. In this vein, Gibran states:

If the meaning of beauty of thought requires the breaking of rules, break it. If there is no known word to express an idea, borrow or invent one. If syntax stands in the way of needed or useful express, away with the syntax (Cited in Rajeb, 2014, p14)

Gibran's words send me to Deleuze "impossibility of not writing" as he described Kafka who deterritorialized the '*major*' language, German, in his writings to express and sound his experiences. In the same line of thought, Deleuze and Guattari (2008, p 16) posit:

... Kafka marks the impasse that bars access to writing for the Jews of Prague and turns their literature into something impossible_ the impossibility of not writing, the impossibility of writing in German, the impossibility of writing otherwise

Deleuze and Guattari hint at the constraints that language can build in the face of a man, in the situation of Kafka, who seeks lines of flights to voice his experiences as a minor writer, living in an ambivalent space. A case like Kafka's only makes it impossible for any '*minor*' writer not to write. Hence, creativity, in all its forms, is what fissures the impasse that bars access to writing for any Kafka-like writer, and gives entry to a new territory where impossibility becomes a possibility. As such, the founding fathers of the Arab American literature can be considered as the pioneers in the articulation of '*revolutionary literature*', to borrow Deleuze and Guattari's words. This literature functions as a counter-discourse to the established Arabic literature deemed exotic and even fundamentalist. However, unlike Kafka, The First Arab American writers started by subverting their language of origin before deterritorializing the English language, which is the '*major*' language in their new territory, namely America.

In addition to Rihani and Gibran, who wrote in Arabic and English respectively, other writers, from Al Mahjar wave wrote solely in Arabic. Such a group of writers includes; Ilya Abu Madi, Mikhail Naimy, Nudra Haddad, Nassib' Aridah, and Rashid Ayyub (Hassan, 2011). The group of writers mentioned above was 'minor' writers considered as rebellions against the traditional conventions of Arabic literature (Hassan, 2011).

In short, Al Mahjar literature, whether written in Arabic or English, is a tool of resistance in the hands of Arabs who seek freedom from their homelands' social and political constraints. Besides, it is a way to get rid of the burden of Orientalists' stereotypes long attributed to Arabs. To put it differently, Arab American writers can be considered as producers of an innovative and experimental body of revolutionary literary artifacts apt to destabilize and deconstruct the Eurocentric premises that have long haunted the Arab's mind.

3.2. Exile in the Post-1960s Arab American Literature

Following the flourishing era of Al Mahjar literature, Arab American literature passed through a period of stillness, as the 1924 Johnson- Reed Quota Act (Majaj, 2008) limited the number of immigrants. Another reason for this halt was the ongoing separation with the home culture. As a result, they went through a severe assimilation process, that historians hailed as a danger of 'assimilating themselves out of existence' to borrow Majaj's words. (Majaj, 2008)

Again, things started to change after the 1960s as new spaces for immigrants were created by Black Power movements and Civil Rights. Publications of works written by the ethnic groups in the American society flourished a fact that facilitated the task for Arab-Americans to write about their origins and ethnic heritage after a period of stagnation. (Majaj, 2008)

In the same period, considerable waves of immigrants entered America from different countries of the Arab world. The newcomers were, as I aforementioned, mostly Muslims and more educated and politically conscious than their earlier counterparts. The new settlers who constituted a broader readership stimulated the Arab American writers to engage more seriously with the Arab culture and politics (Majaj, 2008).

In the 1970s and 1980s, Arab writers launched a quest for identifying the Arab-self, in an attempt to restore what they lost during the assimilation period. Almaz Abinader's autobiography *Children of the Roojme: A Family's Journey* (1991) is an instance of the fictitious works of this period. The novel portrays the suffering of an immigrant family that escaped from her home country which constituted a harsh context dense with misfortunes like famine, tyranny, war, and painful family divisions (Ludescher, 2006). As such, the writer attempts to represent the Arab exiles as victims of their respective countries, victims who

seek a new space where they can co-exist with their American counterparts in harmony and mutual respect.

Furthermore, during this period, political events, most prominently the first war on Iraq have obliged the Arab-Americans to struggle to restore their identity which started to carry the burden of the war's consequences on Americans. Hence, it was high time the Arab Americans introduced their ethnic and cultural identity to the West. They would, as Majaj (2008) put it, '*either define themselves, or others would define them*'.

Other Arab-American writers, who not only explored Arab-American identity and culture, but they also delved in criticizing the Arab world, were numerous. One of the most famous of those writers is Etel Adnan, the multi-talented artist who arrived to America in 1950, coming from Lebanon. Adnan's works of art (paintings and poems) rank her in a transnational framework, rather than an ethnic one. Moreover, she considers herself a universal citizen who struggles against injustice and violence. Her works' interests are less with Arab-American identity in America than with its devolution in the Arab countries. This daring way of self-critique has become an essential element in contemporary Arab-American literature. (Majaj, 2008)

3.3. Exile in Post-9/11 Arab American Literature

The 9/11 attacks' impact on minorities in general and on Arab Americans in particular are tremendous. It has almost changed all aspects of American life (Salaita, 2005). American leaders did overtly urge the American citizens towards a new life style that should take into consideration every single act of the '*Other*', mainly Arabs and Muslims. In other words, the American society has become sensitive and defensive towards ethnic groups, and most notably towards Arabs who shifted from a state of invisibility to that of glaringness because of the horrific attacks. (Salaita, 2005)

Indeed, the 9/11 has put the efforts and attempts, that Edward Said and other post-colonial thinkers have endeavored to deconstruct, back to the starting point giving birth to neo-Orientalism. To put it differently, it has not only reinforced the negative stereotypes (barbarian, savage, exotic) that the West has long attributed to the East, but it also has added the worst of the stereotypes ever associated to the Arab Muslims_ '*terrorists*'. In this vein, the Arab American writer Naomi Shihab Nye stated, in a letter, addressed to the attackers, titled '*Nye To Any Would-Be Terrorist*', which she published on the net shortly after the bloody events:

I am sorry I have to call you that, but I don't know how else to get your attention. I hate that word. Do you know how hard some of us have worked to get rid of that word, to deny its instant connection to the Middle East? And now look. Look what extra work we have. (N. Shihab Nye, 2001:1)

Indeed Arabs have very long suffered from dichotomies, created by orientalist, to differentiate between the West and the East. Superior and inferior, masculine and feminine, literate and illiterate, and so on are the categorizations that have urged the Arabs to strive against the stereotypical mechanism, which stripped them the right to embrace their genuine identity without being loathed and rejected. Furthermore, According to Al Ghabri(2017), Arab Americans have faced a new dichotomy after 9/11, a dichotomy that distinguishes not Arabs from Westerners, but it instead differentiates between good and bad Arabs. In this vein, Al Ghabri (2017:33) posts:

9/11 created a dichotomy between the good Arab and the bad Arab. A good Arab, in their view, is one who conforms to, does not challenge the American norms, and does not try to bring his own culture into the American scene, whereas a bad or evil Arab is one who resists, challenges, or maintains a connection with his either faith or culture. Thus, such a division into good and bad led to what is termed as moral racialization

Such a moral racialization seems to strip the Arab American his/her Arabness. It even rejects her/him the right to be different in the New World that has always adopted diversity and celebrated multiculturalism. Such a division dehumanizes the Arabs by refusing them the very legitimate right of having their language, religion, and culture. Such discrimination over fuels the sentiments of hatred generated after September 11th; the reason that urged the Arab American authors to write about the cursed incidents in their works.

Indeed, albeit the variety of topics tackled in the Arab American narratives, some authors like Rabih Alamddine, Alia Yunis, and Laila Halaby opted for the 9/11 attack's influence on the Arab American society to be the theme of their writings. Indeed, the impact of the horrific incident on the Arab American Psyche was so traumatic that most of the post 9/11 literary artifacts chose to exhibit their deep sorrow towards what happened. Also, important is the defensive position that most writers adopted as a reaction to the unprecedented amount of accusations ever attributed to the Arabs.

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An example of Arab American literary texts, which tackle the Arab exiles' identity, is *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* (2005), a novel written by the Moroccan American Laila Lalami. In her prose, Lalami highlights the issue of 'el *Harga*' (the illegal immigration), of the Arab youth who sail across the Mediterranean sea in small inflatable or wooden boats seeking for heavens which they think are on the other side of the sea. The writer endeavors to justify and defend this category of people who opt to take the risk of dying in the sea rather than to stay in their home countries, which could not afford, according to them, the least portion of a decent life. Through her characters, who I would deem as self-exiles, Lalami attempts to resist the western machinery of stereotyping by portraying the illegal immigrants 'Haragas' as the outcome of the corrupted Arab political regimes. The author seems to address her western readers saying that the Arab exiles are not terrorists, bloodsuckers or invaders; they are merely the victims of injustice in their home countries_ they are hope pursuers.

Another instance of a post 9/11 literary works is Laila Halaby's *once in the Promised Land* (2007), a novel that portrays how Arab American's became subjects of racism and segregation after the devastating attacks. The writer is moving tale offers a bleak image of what it is to be Arab in the Aftermath of 9/11. In this regard, Halaby's protagonist Jassim illustrates best the situation of Arab Americans in that cursed period:

"I am a scientist; I work to make water safe and available. I am a normal citizen who happens to be an Arab. Yes, I have access to the city's water supply, but I have no desire to abuse it. The mere fact that I am an Arab should not add suspicion to the matter. I have spent my entire life trying to find ways to make water safe and accessible for everyone. Just because I am an Arab, because I was raised a Muslim, you want to believe that I am capable of doing evil" (Halaby, 2007, p. 232)

From the above quotation, we deduce that Arab Exiles in America suffer from an improper classification of all Arabs as terrorists or potential terrorists. The writer tries to represent her characters as victims, and consequently, attempts to free them from the guilt of terrorism firmly attributed to them. In other words, contemporary Arab American writers, through their literary texts, seem willing to embrace the role of lawyers who struggle to free the Arab psyche from the stereotypes attributed to it throughout history.

4. CONCLUSION

From the *Book of Khaled* until the most recent books written in English, Arab American literary writers have represented the Arab exile through three stages. Firstly, In El Mahjar literature, the national consciousness permeated the very first literary productions. To put it differently, the first wave of Arab Americans longed for their motherland, so they endeavored to preserve their ethnic identity in a territory in which they celebrated more spaces to sound their experiences without any constraints.

Secondly, in the post-1960 literature, the transnational consciousness replaced the national, in that Arab authors tried to restore what they lost during the assimilation period and build a bridge to link between their culture and the host one. In other words, the Arab attempted to create a third space where they could sound their personal as well as collective concerns in both their host as well as home countries.

Thirdly and recently, resistance and self-defense have become the main concerns of Arab literary writers, notably after the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent war on terror. That is to say, writers have focused on liberating the Arab Americans from the guilt of terrorism, and Islamism stuck to them due to ideological and political reasons. Thus, in most of their works, writers, like Laila Lalami, Laila Halaby, Rabih Alameddine, Alia Yunis, among others, play the role of literary militants, having in charge to defend and restore the Arab image that has long been dirtied by first the orientalist and later by the extremists.

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