ARAB AMERICAN POETS: THE POLITICS OF EXCLUSION AND ASSIMILATION

Nabil Alawi
An-Najah University

Now that American critical studies of ethnic literature are less concerned with the idea of the melting pot in favor of displaying a mosaic of multiculturalism and of highlighting ethnic resistance to assimilation and cultural integration, the Arab's presence in this scenario_ of mosaic multiculturalism remains marginal. Unfortunately the political bias of some publishers, editors, university professors and the mass media in the United States made Arabs' presence an anomaly in the mosaic of ethnic groups. There are more than two million Arab Americans living in the United States and there is a good number of established writers in all literary genres known to us. The reception of these writers in the American scene and literary circles varied according to the chronological development of the political conflict in the Middle East. The Israeli-Arab conflict in particular played a major role in alienating Arabs from the American public and in making them less welcome, as average people and as writers, than other ethnic groups; "the last ethnic group in America safe to hate", one columnist calls Arabs. They are "safe" to hate, the columnist most likely believes, because they are invaded both politically and culturally and they form no threat of retaliation when harmed—an easy target and an under-dog.

Unfortunately since the Gulf War, the Arab identity has become even in some Arab countries a distraction; some Arabs are working hard to revive different ethnic cultures within the Arab World and some don't like to be called Arabs. When some Arabs emigrate to America they pay a high cost for assimilation. An Arab whose name is Mohammad and who changes his name to Mike undermines two thousand years of heritage and culture and naively revokes his identity in return for "passing" as an American so that he would achieve trivial material gains or avoid prejudice, and his feeling doesn't lie easy in him. Mike permits himself to live a double life: he continues to appear as an American and to live as an Arab inside home and among relatives. Many Arabs in America are aware of this schizophrenic character but they are not confessional about it. When one is critical of their "American- behavior, his ideas are dismissed as being bigoted, fanatic and nihilistic: many don't like to diagnose the symptoms of defeat and weakness.

Arab Americans sometimes demonstrate clear awareness of this dilemma of assimilation. Moreover, they find justification for a Palestinian who simply has nowhere to go, born in Kuwait, not admitted to any school of higher education there, not given Kuwaiti identity nor an Israeli ID and in a desperate way finds an escape to America. While in America his Kuwaiti visa expires and there he becomes illegal due to lack of family funds to pay his tuition, so he marries an American girl and works for a minimal wage.

No other ethnic group in America is as alienated as Arabs in America. Even in colleges and universities, American professors generally avoid or refrain from including Arab American writers in their syllabi. It seems a lot safer to choose, say, a Caribbean writer where political bias is generally not an issue than tackle an Arab writer and put him/her self in a position where he/she has to make a political choice.

Teaching and studying Arab American Literature in American universities is generally surrounded by difficulties. First, lack of criticism on the subject makes the whole subject less important and less known. Second, there is a constant focus on political issues in the writings of many Arab American writers, such focus would lead to overwhelming questions relating to the very terminology of Middle East politics. Ironically, anti-Semitism, for example, refers to the hatred of Jews but not the hatred of Arabs, who are also Semitic, conversely the Jewish diaspora cannot be compared or contrasted with a Palestinian one and the Holocaust is only one in modern history; when Jewish people commit a massacre against Palestinians, it is usually termed as an act of self defense and Palestinian resistance is termed as acts of terror against Jewish women and children. "One of the most important differences between Arabs in the Arab World and those who live in the West", Edward Said observes, "is that on a daily basis the latter are forced to confront the Jewish experience of Anti- Semitism and genocide" (1). Third. multiculturalism in the Arab World: there are different social, linguistic and literary colors within the Arab World pertaining to every Arab Country. Fourth, stereotypical minds of some Americans who still hold that Arabs are nomadic people who are handicapped by desert life and whose backwardness is immensely excessive. To many Americans and Europeans of our present time, Arabs are rich, corruptly rich; they drive fancy cars, have a harem and are attracted to western women. Such stereotypical minds make it difficult for an Arab to assimilate and if he does, he has to face a mountain of prejudice.

Arab American writers have touched upon this dilemma of assimilation. Fawas Turki after dramatizing the cultural conflict that he has through authentic illustrations concludes a poem that he calls "Being a Good Americani"- with the following lines:

I had my life
figured out cold for me
only from time to time
I wake up in the middle of the night.
or maybe somewhere when the night
is just fading into day,
when the moment
is neither here nor there,
which is safe time to think
about Palestine and olive trees,
and I pity myself
and the place I came from. (Orfalea and Elmusa 198)

Self pity is an automatic result of the kind of conflict experienced by any Palestinian who tries to "pass" as American to secure refuge in a country which condones violence against his people. Thus it was psychologically easier for a Palestinian or an Arab to "pass"- as American during the first half of this century; it was even easier during the sixties than it was during the seventies and eighties. And of course the volume of easiness corresponds to American foreign policy in the Middle East. Therefore one can easily trace a shift in sensibilities, tastes and orientations of Arab American literature written during the first half of this century and that written during the 60's, 70's and 80's (Younis 35). The first generation of Arab American writers were less hesitant to assimilate. We are told however that the Syrians resisted assimilation more than any ethnic minority in America (excepting Chinese). Most of the early Arab immigrants were from the Levant (Syria, Lebanon and Palestine). They were spurred by the Christian missions in Syria and Lebanon, and consequently a good number of the Syrian and Lebanese immigrants were Christian. It seems that these early Christian immigrants were tempted by promises of an easier social and religious distance that awaited their arrival in the New World. However, when their number increased it didn't take long before Washington Street in Manhattan was referred to as "Little Syria." Prejudice against them then accelerated and their dream of religious and social harmony did not materialize. The reaction to hostilities of the West was only met with further solidarity and belonging to their Arabic culture and heritage. The writers of the first generation (Arneen Rihani, Gihran K, Gibran, Limit Holvdny, M, Naimy, Elia Abu Madi), however, show something contrary. They were more enthusiastic for American culture and less sensitive to the question of assimilation. The early literary experiences of these poets were purely meditative. humanistic and philosophical and far from any political bias. For many, assimilation was a matter of little importance which can be checked by the continuous presence of a nostalgic. feeling.

Among the assimilationists from the first generation was Elia Abu Madi, an Arab poet of Lebanese descent who was more popular in the Arab World than he was in America. His poems are still taught in almost all schools in the Arab World. He was exiled by the Ottoman authorities in 1912 and he saw in America a refuge and a shelter. He wrote a poem praising the American flag and declaring himself an American patriot:

On it the stripes escort the stars
True shelter is under it
Long live America, the best Sanctuary
From generation to generation. (Orfalea and Elmusa 76)

But the idea of assimilation in the poetry of Abu Madi doesn't rise to the level of a theme and it did not then stir the repulsion of his countrymen, for the political scene was quiet and the role of America in Middle East politics was not defined yet. But Abu Madi expresses his Americanness in other themes that were not known to his compatriot such as existentialism and fear of annihilation, through which he provides links between Western thoughts and the East. The French Existential school had an impact on his poetry. Some of his well-liked poems translate human agony and existential nothingness. He. however, wrote in Arabic and he was more popular in the Arab World than he was in

America. The existential trend in Madi's poetry is not known to be autobiographical for he led a contented life with his wife Dora Madi. The "riddle" (of existence) is one poem that captures much of Madi's metaphysical contemplations. For the purpose of highlighting the enigma of one's origin and existence, he employs the refrain "I don't know" in some of his poems. The most anthologized poem "Riddles" addresses this very theme; man is predestined and trapped in an indifferent universe where he is given no choice.

I came
Not knowing
My feet saw the way
And I walked there
And I shall continue
Whether I so desire or not How did I come?
How see the path?
I know not

He further contemplates the sea as a possible source of human life:
I asked the sea
Do I come from you?
Is it true
What some say Of you and me Or is it a lie? The waves laughed
And called
I don't know. (Orfalea and Elrnusa 75)

Abu Madi's existential pessimism is quintessentially American: it finds its roots in the depression of the 1930's, the First and the Second World Wars and finally the Cold War. In a poem entitled "The Bomb of Annihilation" Abu Madi expresses cosmic uneasiness at the nuclear threat which pained many Americans during the post-war era. He concludes his poem with the following lines:

Yet one thing consoles us
when the bomb smashes our earth
death will spare no human being
to blame others for the massacre. (Orfalea and Elmusa 73)-

Ameen Rihani was also an assimilationist and a contemporary of Abu Madi. Rihani advocated American democracy as a substitute for the Ottomans and the Europeans who dominated the Arab World.

Gibran Kahlil Gibran, the leading Arab American writer was severely criticized by many of his poet friends and admirers from the second and third generation of Arab American writers for his noncommitment to the cause of Arabism. In the Arab world the poet is a political spokesman of his people, and twentieth century Arab critics coined the term "committed writers" to refer to writers who represented political orientation or who claimed allegiance to a political group. Thus, "non-committed writers" were dismissed as inferior and with no universal message to convey to people. Romantic poets were examples of the latter type. This is only to say that in the Arab World, poetry and politics are inseparable and the émigré poets (Arab poets in North and South America) took this habit with them (though on a smaller scale) to the new world. Gibran's poetry for example is known to be romantic and meditatively philosophical. In the Arab World the very few political poems that he wrote are highlighted.

Thus Gibran is generally romantic, meditative and spiritual. tie wrote on spiritual and religious themes adopting a pagan theology. that is now transcendentally feminine and now essentially pantheistic undermining cultural harriers. Being a man, Gibran transcends sex through feminine themes with words that brought hope and happiness to millions of weddings in different cultures and countries from a man who himself spent his life a bachelor. Further, in many of his poems the message that he relates to the people of his time calls for the necessity of religious tolerance, cross cultural understanding and human love. In a poem he calls "Khalil the Heretic" his pantheistic theme becomes most apparent:

Listen to us. 0 liberty,
Have compassion on us, O Daughter of Athens, Rescue us. O Sister of Rome.
Save us, O companion of Moses,
Come to our aid. O beloved of Mohammad, Teach us O bride of Jesus,
Strengthen our hearts that we may live;
Or strengthen the arms of our enemies against us That we may wither, perish and find peace.

His themes, therefore, are quintessentially American lending themselves to the Emersonian impulse and to Whiteman's faith in the redeeming power of brotherhood and self reliance in a world where poetry becomes "a commodity ... and not a breath of immortality" (Orfalea and Elmusa 21).

The Americanness of Gibran makes him "non-committed" to the cause of Arabism and perhaps less admired by even some of his compatriots from the second and third generations of Arab American writers. Eugene Paul Nasser. sums it all up in his "A Disputation with Kahlil Gibran"

Do you not see that you will not satisfy man, Khalil Gibran, with your cold abstractions of love and life beyond the personal love and life, with your great soul or Great Self, or Vast Man or Master Spirit? We have had it all before (postcards to Blake and Whitman) Man will have his Heaven with private rooms and his personal immortality with his shoes on.
You do him wrong to turn him from his village or his village culture. But you know this, my brother. my countryman. Is there any village more beautiful than Bscharri, your village? (Orfalea and Elmusa 154)

According to Naser, Gibran's "abstractions of love" blinded him from seeing his "village culture". Thus Gibran continues to be abstract, more international and perhaps more American than Arab. Naser urges Gibran to be "one of us":

I say to my brother Gibran in his own words,
Come and be one of us
Descend and appease your hunger with our bread And quench your thirst with our wine
Our bread is in the tales of our grandmother and the wisdom from her lips
Our wine in the pomegranate cheeks and the gentleness of roses of our wives
The sanctity of our mother in the whiteness of orange blossoms
And our sister's strength in the hill and
streams of Lebanon.
And do not fear, 0 Kahlil Gibran, that the village dream will stifle our children
You would have us break boundaries in an ever widening circle
But a dream of love must be at the center of each circle.
A point, a place, a home to which the skylark must return. (Orfalea and Elmusa159)

Gibran calls for human love which seems to be not reciprocal according to Naser, "love must be at the center of each circle." Where Gibran preaches love there are those who preach hate. Preaching of hate should not deter one from carrying on with his message of love, but one should provide a ground for optimism and have enough prudence before making any compromises towards assimilation.

Even when Gibran is political and critical of imperialism in the Middle East, one finds echoes of Whitman, Bryant and sometimes Emerson. During the time of Gibran the British Mandate in some Middle East countries was busy inflaming religious conflicts in the area. Gibran cautioned Arabs against the game of religious differences in a poem that he called "Kali111 the Heretic."

In order to secure their power and to rest at the heart's ease they have armed the Durzi to fight the Arab:
Have instigated the Shi'i against the Sunni: Have incited the Kurd to slaughter the Bedouin
Have encouraged the Mohammadan to fight the Christian—
How long is a brother to fight his brother on the breast of the mother?
How long is a neighbor to threaten his neighbor
near the tomb of the beloved? (Orfalca anEtmusa 24)
Whereas the conflicts presented are typically Middle Eastern, they are resolved in a Whitmanesque fashion— "on the breast of the mother"— nature.

Gibran's romantic and spiritual poetry can never be underestimated. It represents cosmic themes that are certainly behind his international popularity among Americans and Arabs alike. For. many American writers of the first generation assimilation was more of a social and cultural issue than it was political. Their poetry therefore expresses nostalgic feelings; sometimes they miss the country, the extended family, the environment or even recollections of friendship. Most of the writers of this group were writers who were born in the Middle East and who went either young with their families like Gibran or as adults seeking political or economic security like Abu Madi. Figs, olives, grapes, za'tar. mint leaves, sage, apricots and okra become symbols and ethnic icons. And not unlike the early settlers of America, these narrate the difficulties that they encountered during the journey across the Atlantic Ocean and the difficulties they faced as peddlers and foreigners in the "land of opportunity.- They. however, were to bear the difficulties in foreign lands because their sojourn in America had with it promises for a better future. Their homeland awaits their arrival with much anticipation. They, in turn. reconstruct the image of their countries which would be romantically free from foreign domination (Turkey and Europe). This nostalgic feeling is a source of restlessness and disquietude. The estrangement during the early years of this century was greater. People had little chance of visiting home once they crossed the Atlantic Ocean; distance, means of transportation and the limited resources made visiting home a dream.

The movements of the early Arab immigrants through different cultures and countries increased their restlessness and perhaps their desire for assimilation. Adele Younis noticed that many of the early Arab American immigrants never made it to America. Europe, being a transfer point in their journey to America. became a final destination for many. Others, however rerouted their journey to South America and then after several years, to the United States. Upon their arrival many worked as peddlers whether in South or North America. Actually the word maskati which in Portuguese means peddler, first described Arab peddlers who immigrated from Maskat the capital of Oman.

The restless and nomadic nature of an Arab is essentially Bedouin lending itself to the desert and the openness of its landscape and frontiers. The Arab in the desert moved from one place to another in search of grazing spots for his animals and his restlessness is transferred into a motif in the writings and lives of many Arab American writers of all generations. Doris Safic. an Arab American writer who descends from Palestinian roots, went to the United States via El Salvador; Elmaz Abinader has in addition to her American experience South American (Brazilian) heritage. Etel Adnan "fell in love" with the gardens of Palazzo Pitti and became a prolific writer in French and English. Sharif El Musa and Fawaz Turki are Palestinian refugee poets who left the restless life of the refugee camps in Lebanon and Jericho searching for a settled life but only to face more restlessness.

In her poems Elmaz Abinader presents a nomadic quality or, as some call it, a panethnic quality in which she represents the cultivation of many cultures and ethnic identities that she was exposed to through living in different cultures. She wrote of Dar A Luz (the house of almonds), Pigeon Rock (Lebanese villages) and she revisits the Amazon; Africa then recomposes a panethnic identity.

These nights are ornamental
I am wrapped in blankets from an African country
to which I've never been, My lampshade was woven

by dark cracked hands who keep moons on street in Nassau. My Mexican dress and Italian shoes are all
I wear to watch the sun drop red
into the Hudson River and Jeat the light
with my own foreign eyes. (Abinaner)

And in Yemen, the poet roams the market place and is touched by the simplicity of the Yemeni people whose simplicity and humanness are portrayed in their simple engagement in daily affairs; these people are content with what they have, they are "neither north nor south."

They pick the tender leaves and crush
them between their teeth and tuck a ball in their cheeks. Each tells of days in jail, of death threats The room is filled with laughter and silence and smoke.
The poets recite for the love of Yemen, its golden land and historical beauty. Poets beneath the light of the sky
are neither north nor south. (USIS Circulation)

These nomadic impulses always carried with them memories of home, the birth place of the poet's ancestors, so that Lebanon becomes Babylon and the poet searches for his/her roots among the cultural ruins of a great civilization. In many cases the scenes recalled from home are disheartening: a sequence of atrocities against Arabs first by the Ottomans, then by the British and finally by Israel. In "Pleasure is Freedom Song" Abinader carries with her the pains of her people and moans with the bereaved Lebanese woman N\ ho reminds her of the chains of suffering which invoke the memory of her grandmother crawling behind Turkish soldiers

I listen to the women left behind to war rummage through memory. They become hunters and gatherers, walking through streets
where the earth has burst to the surface, defending itself from assaults of fire They clutch to them the one thing -
the day could not pass without a battery, fresh soap, shoes for a child whose feet
have grown quickly. Like my sitti who crawled behind the lines of Turkish soldiers.
Flour and rice hanging in bags in the cave of her arms pits. (USIS Circulation)

Etel Adnan finds the nomadic feature of the American people essentially Arabic:

To be an Arab is already being a bit an American. And being an American is already being almost an Arab, even without knowing it. Americans are a nomadic people. Arabs are a nomadic and restless people. Both
are restless and reckless. Because Americans • are nomadic they could but go to the moon.
And Arabs were astronomers and mathematicians and opened the new age—the age that made
it possible later to go to the moon and to go to the stars (Orfalea and Elmusa 86)

As I have mentioned earlier the first generation of Arab American writers lived under different political circumstances than those experienced by second and third generations especially the political situation of the Middle East. The second generation of Arab American writers woke up to different realities. The Israeli Arab conflict, the oil crisis, the Gulf war of 1990 broadened the differences between the United States and the Arab World. The first generation's sense of belonging to the American flag and the fervent desire for assimilation were no longer entertained or admired by the new generation. The political issues proved to be chronic and the American bias towards Israel became difficult to bear even by the most ardent sympathizers with Israel from among Arab Americans. For example. the 1982 massacres of Palestinians in Sabra and Shatila invoked the sympathies of many Arab American writers, particularly Naomi Shihab, Gregory Orfalea and Lawrence Joseph to name only a few. Many Arab Americans expressed shock to the extent of losing faith in Arabism. In her poem "Blood" Naomi Shihab, expresses dismay and anger

I call my father, we talk around the news.
It is too much for him
Neither of his two languages can reach it
I drive into the country to find sheep. cows.
to plead with the air
Who calls anyone civilized?
Where can the crying, heart graze?
What does a true Arab do now? (Orfalea and Elmusa 272)

Orfelea on the other hand is struck by the story of a Palestinian child screaming from inside a waste container in Sabra and Shatila.

On a September night, a man looks down into a waste disposal and hears a child call out.
For the first time
in his marriage, he stands still.
For the first time, the disposal speaks to : bones, sinew grinding,
ice and flesh made into paste
His breastbone vibrates. (Orfalea and Elmusa 259)

The political impulse in the poetry of Arab American writers is part of their consciousness; it is not much of their choice, but as ethnic writers their nostalgic feelings take them home where memories of childhood are being burned and the flames of endless wars and consequent hatred resulting from successive colonial periods leaves little room for optimism. But as all Arabs. Arab American writers long for freedom and they have a humble ambition a home of their own unoccupied and without siege as Ahinader puts It in her poem "Sixty Minutes":

But remember I am an Arab too, looking for a home of my own
unoccupied, without siege I need my fires quiet. my pockets empty:

my water bottles full and cool. At night I watch the moon that passed across Lebanon before it come to this sky. The stars
are your thousand eyes watching the Hezbollah move in the dark.
And their glitter is the flame in my eyes that rises quickly and dies (USIS Circulation)

Despite their humanistic outlook and the humanistic themes they treat in their literature. Arab American writers are not popular and they are usually excluded from literary anthologies, ethnic and otherwise, for mere political reasons. The political exclusion corresponds with a literary one: the political hegemony corresponds with a literary one and an occupied physical space with an "occupied" literary one. The Heath Anthology of American Literature is an outstanding anthology with ethnic orientations.' Unfortunately the anthology doesn't include a single Arab American writer. The absence of Arabic representation from an anthology like The Heath Anthology, does not really undervalue Arab American writers: it rather points to the fact that the anthology is based on "loose canons.- as Henry Louis Gates, Jr., would put it, that are really wanting. Perhaps it is time for Arab American writers to get the consideration they deserve based on the merit of their works without political bias.

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