

Lifting the “Veil” Off the Literature of the Arab American Diaspora

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Abstract

Although Arab-American literature has been in existence in the U.S. for over a century, it has only recently begun to be recognized as part of the ethnic landscape of literary America. However, the last two decades have seen a dramatic increase in the publication by Arab-American writers. This literary burgeoning reflects in part the shifting historical, social, and political contexts that have pushed Arab-Americans to the foreground, creating both new spaces for their voices and new urgencies of expression, as well as the flourishing creativity of these writers. From the 500-years-long presence of the Arabs on the North American continent, I have chosen three significant moments of reference, defining for the construction of the Americans' awareness of the Arabic presence in the American cultural landscape.

Key words: Diaspora; Ethnicity; Race; Arab American; Minority; Identity

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INTRODUCTION

MOMENT I: In Chapter 2, “Where Mexicans Fit in the New American Racial Order” of her book on the history of the Mexican American community, Laura E. Gómez contributes the surprising account of the Pueblo Indians in New Mexico who use to say, “The first white man our people saw was a black man.” This “black man”, the

historians have found—was an important member of the expedition led by Fray Marcos de Niza and sponsored by the Spanish Crown in 1539. His name was Estevan and, during a traditional ceremony commemorating the expedition, the man acting as Estevan has his face painted black and his head covered with a sheep pelt to suggest curly hair (Gómez, 2007, pp.48-50).¹ Black face and curly hair means African which transfer the discussion to a different level. There is evidence that Estevan (alias Estebanico, or Zammouri) was either a slave captured on the west coast of Africa and brought over to America by the Spanish slave traders, or a native of Al-Zammour, in Morocco, where he was captured by the Portuguese, sold into slavery in 1511. Brought to America, Zammouri became a healer, then an interpreter, and an explorer—which justifies his participation into Marcos de Niza's expedition (Figure 1).



Figure 1
Zammouri (Arab American National Museum in Dearborn, Michigan)

¹ Detailed information about the customs of the Pueblo Indians can be found in Sando, J. S. (1992). *Pueblo Nations: Eight Centuries of Pueblo Indian History* (pp.50-3). Santa Fe, NM: Clear Light Publishers.

Three hundred years later, Omar Ibn Said (1770-1864), a slave in North Carolina and a native of Senegal, wrote what is considered the first known autobiography of an Arab American (Figure 2). “*Oh ye Americans*”: *The Autobiography of Omar Ibn Said* (1831) was written in Arabic and then translated into English. He was one of the many Muslim African slaves transported to the Americas—as many as 10% of the total of African slaves who survived the Middle Passage. According to his Presbyterian pastor and later researchers, Omar—although he had converted to Christianity in 1821—continued to adhere to Islam all along his life on the American continent. He was a promoter of his original religion among the other slaves, and his writings contain Muslim texts and prayers. Even his *Autobiography* begins with extensive quotations he had earlier memorized from the Holy Quran during his education in his native African village of Futa Toro (Senegal) (Allen, 1984, p.450).



Figure 2
Omar Ibn Said (1770-1864)

The migration of blacks to America that began with the transatlantic slave trade established a permanent link between Africa and the Americas. Today, this forced journey of savage horrors is being understood in new ways. If it brought an unwilling people to a strange land, it also initiated the transformation of an African cultural consciousness into an African American one as Africans sold into slavery transplanted their cultures to the New World. This situation turned into a contradictory experience of neither being accepted in one world nor welcomed in another. Migration and exile, crossing and even transgressing boundaries have become a natural arena for exploration by the novelist. By closing gaps, by raising consciousness about the past, multiculturalism tries to restore a sense of wholeness in a postmodern era that fragments human life and thought. Whether community is always attained or not is difficult to say because multiculturalism is still evolving. Concepts of race, class, culture, gender and ethnicity are the driving themes of a multicultural approach, which also promotes

respect for the dignity of the lives and voices of the forgotten.

MOMENT THREE: On the dome of the Main Reading Room of the Thomas Jefferson Building in the Library of Congress—the largest library in the world and, “in effect, the library of the whole of the American people, directly serving the interest of the entire country” there is a beautiful and inspiring mural called “The Evolution of Civilization.” (Figure 3) Present since the new building opened in 1897, it has been referred to as being in “the noblest and most inspiring” position in the library and as being “literally and obviously the crowning glory of the building.” The mural depicts “the twelve countries, or epochs, which have contributed most to the development of present-day civilization in this country.” “Islam” is one of the epochs and its contribution to “human progress” is represented as “Physics.” The depiction illustrates this contribution of Islam as:

an Arab, standing for the Moorish race which introduced into Europe not only an improved science of Physics... but of Mathematics and Astronomy also. His foot rests upon a glass retort, and he is turning over the leaves of a book of mathematical calculations. (Small, 1897, p.74)

Another epoch represented is “America” and its contribution to “human progress” is depicted as “science.”



Figure 3
Islam as one of the Twelve Basic Elements in the “Evolution of Civilization” Mural (Library of Congress, Washington D.C.)

According to Mohammad R. Salama, author of *Islam, Orientalism and Intellectual History: Modernity and the Politics of Exclusion Since Ibn Khaldun*, of the twelve representations in the mural,

[...] there is an uncanny resemblance between Islam and America in this clock-like painting. Not only do both have the closest connection among the other figures in terms of global contribution, but they also share common features: They are both seated in a pensive philosopher-like pose while curiously pondering a problem of physics or science, working at the moment of their glorification in this global hall of fame. Despite their different appearances (Islam is a bare-chested bearded man with a turban and a medieval lab apparatus underneath his foot, and America is a young muscular man in work clothes attending to a machine of sorts), *Islam and America are tied together in*

the sacred task of improving the human condition. (Salama, 2011, p.210)

1. THE HISTORICAL-SOCIAL BACKGROUND

For years, the USA dynamic demographic structure has been the subject of much public discourse and debate. At the same time, issues of lifestyle preferences and challenges to traditional views about gender, race and ethnicity, and class roles have raised central questions revolving around what it means to live in America and be an American. Within this context, ideas of multiculturalism, diversity, unity, balkanization, the United States as a melting pot and assimilation have filled the news and print media as well as many books exploring the meaning and consequences of these ideas.

The transformation of the American nation into a multicultural society could result in a nation that voluntarily and openly accepts the benefits of contributing traditions, values, philosophies and behaviors. This trend, though, is struggling against a social structure that has been perceived to be grounded upon a dominant culture and value system. According to John A. Garcia, multiculturalism and difference are challenging cultural and ideological supremacy upsetting the sense of naturalness and neutrality that infused most peoples' sense of modern society. The U.S. American ethos was characterized by individualism, egalitarianism, equality of opportunity and emphasis on Western cultures, among other things. All these characteristics have historically been turned into the perfect ingredients of a pervasive American tradition that serves as a cultural core that all members of society learnt to share and internalize ensuring societal stability and gradual change.

Indigenous populations like Native American tribes were brought into the American social system via conquest. They have either remained isolated Native Americans or they have conformed to the "American tradition." Succeeding waves of immigrants have undergone a similar acculturation and assimilation process in which acquisition of and dependence upon a national ideology is attained. The predominance of the American *melting pot* thesis is represented by the acceptance of an adaptation process encountered by all groups entering American society.

With a diversity of cultural as well as racial and ethnic groups continually entering the United States either voluntarily or involuntarily, group differences are acknowledged, but in transitional terms. That is, group members are expected to internalize American values within the first generation. Their group traditions and values are to be replaced in a short period of time. Although group difference in reference to values, attitudes, language, or behaviors may be compared neutrally,

in reality, too often supremacy is the result of such a comparison. Being different from the dominant culture implies incompatibility, inferiority and non-integration into the wider social sphere generating real social conflicts between the groups. Thus, multiculturalism is believed to represent, at minimum, a challenge, but more likely a threat to the foundation of this country's "greatness" and strength. This is, then, the social and ideological background that justifies my present endeavor to find those elements in the autobiographical writings of Arab Americans that justify their acceptance the "melting pot" that is America, while preserving their cultural identity.

2. INTO AMERICA'S MELTING-POT

...It all started in 1909, when Israel Zangwill, the son of Jewish immigrants, wrote a play, *The Melting Pot*, which played before audiences of several American cities. Everywhere it received high praise. It showed the melting pot as an American reality by portraying the life of David Quixano, a Jewish immigrant in New York absorbing the American culture, its English language, and *Weltanschauung*, who—in Act I—first defines the notion:

America is God's Crucible, the great Melting-Pot where all the races of Europe are melting and re-forming! [...] Germans and Frenchmen, Irishmen and Englishmen, Jews and Russians—into the Crucible with you all! God is making the American. (Act 1)

It is the fusion of nationalities, races and cultures, all ready to melt into the cauldron of the new republic of the United States of America that the play insisted upon. It is worth noting that the concept was later challenged, and the late twentieth century theoreticians insist on the unity within diversity that characterizes the American cultural and ethnic landscape.

The definition of multiculturalism requires consideration in addition to an analysis of its relevance to contemporary American society. The most prevalent view of multiculturalism is rooted in race and ethnicity. Multiculturalism is a sustained effort by racial and ethnic groups to recover, preserve and achieve recognition for their distinct cultural identities from society at large. Clearly then, multiculturalism represents a resistance to the cultural amalgamation of the American "melting pot," which limits the number of pathways leading to successful integration (Garcia, 1995, p.30). The only option available for the members of minority racial and ethnic groups is assimilation by raising awareness of human diversity. By acknowledging that people are different in gender, sexual orientation or lifestyle there may be the starting point of the process which may have as final result of their acceptance into the mainstream.

Racism' is one of the most debated notions in modern and postmodern societies. The study of the impact of racial inequality, racist movements and forms of racial and ethnic violence has acquired greater importance at

the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century. There is a growing recognition that writing and speaking about racism will make the public aware of what they might be faced with when dealing with manifestation of racism. Although scholars of nationalism have supported the idea of a chosen people has greatly informed the ideologies of many modern nations, recent studies have been less concerned with presenting a unified narrative of the nation than in exploring the contestatory rhetorics of discourse.

Defining the postcolonial writer aims at appropriating those definitions and interpretations of the postcolonial concept that better fits our critical discourse. This attempt at defining Naipaul as a postcolonial writer was prompted by Salman Rushdie who—discussing his volume of short stories *East, West*—stated that the main element is the comma in the title, which both unites and separates East and West. We start from the assumption that, if imperialism is usually understood as ‘belonging to the empire, then in the particular case of Indian-Trinidadian-British Naipaul, we are considering the expansion of the expansion of the British Empire during the reign of Queen Victoria, which involved “settlement, governing indigenous peoples, exploiting and developing the resources of the land, and embedding imperial government” (Wisker, 2000, p.5).

Besides Gina Wisker’s considerations, we have also resorted to Duke University professor Dirlik, who understands the term postcolonial (a) as a literal description of conditions in formerly colonial societies; (b) as a description of a global condition after the period of colonialism; and (c) as a description of a discourse on the above-named conditions that is informed by the epistemological and psychic orientations that are products of those conditions. We have subsequently decided upon delineating the three phases encountered in the history of postcolonial theories: (a) 1960-1970 cry of protest from the representatives of the colonized nations, which ascertain their difference, and draw attention to some communities which want to be appreciated as much more than an otherness devalued by the colonizing process; (b) the second phase covers the last two decades of the 20th century, a period of the great ambiguities, of the identity unrest, of the inability to define, circumscribe, and objectify the characteristics, to go to the depths and clearly draw the differences; (c) a final stage, in which the colonial past, more and more distant in time, is serenely accepted, its ambiguities are seen from a rather positive perspective, and the transnational elements become “translational”, that is fertilizing and powerful.

Then, whatever the postcolonial writers do, they are “celebrating difference.” According to Kaplan, “celebrating difference” should finally lead us to “an acquaintance with the specificity and similarities of cultural contexts, the being in the world.” The

postcolonial “imaginary,” and the discourses available to us, interfere with our experiences as readers. “Location” as a notion is much richer merely than that of the cultural, historical, and geographical context of writing and reading. Location and the “loci of enunciation” are the places or contexts from which we experience and speak, where we place ourselves ideologically, spiritually, imaginatively.

We find ourselves in the midst of a distinction between Occident and Orient, according to which the Westerners were “superior” by their more advanced technology, by their better organized administration and army, by their culture and rationalism. The Orientals, on the other hand, are devoid of qualities, and “inferior” due to their “emotivity”. Albert Memmi, far from reducing the colonizer/colonized relationship to a simple power relationship, includes an important imagological component. It is a complex project which involves three stages: (a) the other as an absence—something devoid of all the qualities appreciated in the West; (b) the other turned opaque, while his humanity—mysterious and impenetrable—totally disappears; and (c) the collectivity the other belongs to is associated with organizational inability, chaos, corruption, and evil (Memmi, 1974). Edward Said thinks that—confronted with alterity identities—the Westerners have only two options left: (a) to ignore the differences and accept alterity, interpreting it from the position of their own cultural values; and (b) to prefer the security offered by their own cultural position and refuse the point of view of the alterity (Said, 1979). We are further considering other pertinent views—Jan Mohammad, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, G. J. Heuman, or John Noyes, according to whom colonial space signifies “the formation of a spatial entity through a process that has been adapted in almost all settler colonies and even partly in colonies of occupation,” while division and hierarchy form the basis of the trajectory of colonial space. Last but not least, Homi Bhabha’s theory of hybridity and Ashcroft’s theory of habitation are similar in that both are formulated as cultural forms and resisting strategies. Ashcroft thinks that a first step towards the total disassembling of the unequal spatial structures could be a successful postcolonial literature, engaged imaginatively with deconstruction and reconstruction.

In the attempt to understand the place of the diasporic writing—Indian, in this case—in the context of world literature, I came across an article published in a Somali online journal—*Hiiraan Online*—recounting an evening with the renowned Somali writer Nuruddin Farah in Ottawa, Canada. What struck me most was Farah’s statement:

One of the pleasures of living away from home is that you become the master of your destiny, you avoid the constraints and limitations of your past and if need be create an alternative life for yourself. That way everybody becomes the other and you are the centre of the universe. You are a community when you are

away from home—the communal mind remembering. Memory is active when you are in exile. (Farah, 2009)

3. DIMENSIONS OF THE DIASPORA

I started this presentation by defining diaspora. On the other hand, I should stress that the contemporary use of the concept of diaspora emphasizes that its modern forms are closely linked with the ever-increasing development of global capitalism that moves capital and labour from one space to another, wherever cheap workers are needed. The narratives of diaspora do not only consist of writings telling of free-floating subjects entering new worlds and acquiring new identities in an unproblematic manner. There are instances of representations of history, or stories addressing the formation of the hybrid identity of the second-generation immigrant.

The question triggered by this statement is whether a diasporic writer as complex as Naipaul did become the master of his destiny, avoiding the constraints and limitations of his past. I consider it necessary to go deeper into the theory of diasporic writing. Thus, Kalra, Kalhon and Hutynuk in their book *Diaspora and Hybridity* review the different meanings of *diaspora*. According to the authors, we are at present witnessing a fall of the term “immigrant” which together with “ethnicity” used to be closely linked to the concept of “diaspora”. “Immigrant” has acquired a negative connotation designating a person who is from somewhere else, an intruder to a certain extent, which is in direct contradiction to the status of the children of migrants who have never migrated and were born in the host-country (Kalra et al., 2005, p.14). Thus, the critics suggest that envisaging diaspora as a process, not as a homogeneous group of people would be beneficial:

When thinking about diaspora as a process, we are not considering specific groups of people, but more general ideas that may be applied across a range of groups. Thus, diaspora can denote ideas about belonging, about place and about the way in which people live their lives. (Ibid., 29)

Such an approach would shift the attention from the idea of diaspora as a specific group of people, to a set of more general concepts that could be “applied across a range of groups” (Ibid.). In this manner, diaspora could stand for ideas of belonging and of place without disregarding the “intimate or material connections to other places” (Ibid.). The diasporic condition seen as a process rather than as a feature of a finite group of individuals is in accordance with Stuart Hall’s definition of diasporic identities. The critic describes diasporic identities as “constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew” (Hall, 1990, p.402). This permanent “becoming” at the cultural identity level is both a source of enrichment and a cause for tension. As Abdul R. Jan Mohamed puts it, “genuine and thorough comprehension of Otherness is

possible only if the self can somehow negate or at least severely bracket the values, assumptions, and ideology of his culture” (Jan Mohamed, 1990, p.18). The themes of in-between-ness and hybridity were at first the topic of interest for postcolonial studies, but since diaspora is linked to ideas of acculturation, deterritorialization and settlement in a different social, political and cultural space, these notions have been re-interpreted to fit the diasporic condition.

So what does it mean to experience the diasporic process (as defined by Karla, Kalhon and Hutynuk)? According to the extensive body of criticism available, the issue of identity is central to interpreting life in diaspora. Here too we must differentiate between cultural identity and personal identity. Though they are linked and influence each other to a great extent, we must deal with them separately.

In “Cultural Identity and Diaspora”, Stuart Hall draws attention upon the idea of cultural identity as being in a continuous process of transformation. The critic forwards a theory according to which identity is not a finite “product”, but one that suffers alterations which become apparent especially in the case of diasporic subjects. Their experience, their moving from one space to another, from one culture to another, is bound to influence their identity. Hall maintains that diasporic people develop hybrid cultural identities: “The diaspora experience [...] is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of ‘identity’ which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by *hybridity*.” (Hall, 1990, p.402)

CONCLUSION

In the context of the turmoil caused in all European countries by the refugee crisis, and the unavoidable contact of the two different cultures—Arabic and Western European—I have decided to approach the literature written in English by the writers of the Arab diaspora, with a particular stress on the writings of the Arab women writers both in the UK and the USA. A conceptual framework regarding the condition of the emigrant as seen in the works of Arab women writers may be found in the theory of liminality as formulated by Victor Turner in his 1969 discussion of rites of passage. It helps us to understand the ways a protagonist must negotiate her fate. He argues that “liminality includes few or none of the attributes of the previous or future states, and that the features of liminality are ambiguous; that is, they are outside of all society’s standard classification (p.94). During the liminal movement between social identities, the individual finds themselves “betwixt and between” positions normally assigned by law, custom, convention, and ceremony, where they experience a suspension or reversal of the normal rules of living (Turner, 1969, pp.94-95).

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