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Negotiating Boundaries: Arab-American Poetry and the Dilemmas of Dual Identity

Abraham Panavelil Abraham, Ph.D.

Abstract

Like postcolonial literature, Arab-American literature also has its origin in the credibility and acceptance of the principles of change: social, psychological and linguistic changes. To absorb these changes involves an immense effort on the part of these people to break with the old in search of the new, to break with establishment and the tradition. They struggle to establish an alternating identity; feeling the conflict between the old and the new.

This article will focus on some of the contemporary Arab-American poets like Sam Hamod, Naomi Shihab Nye, Mohja Kahf and Nathalie Handal who address these issues in a direct, even confrontational manner to delineate their concerns.

Caught between two worlds, the characters negotiate a new social space, caught between two cultures and often languages, the writer negotiates a new literary space. "Doubtlessness" is the essence of their writings. What unites this body of Arab-American writings into one literary system are partially the recurring themes, often in binary oppositions, which permeate it: acculturation, duality, discrimination, alienation between parents and children, memories of wars, poverty and prosperity.

In the final analysis, these writers indirectly remind us that stereotypes and prejudices, war and genocide are overcome only by bridges of dialogues and not by walls of separation.

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Negotiating Boundaries: Arab-American Poetry and the Dilemmas of Dual Identity

Who is Arab-American?

Many travelers find themselves saying of an experience in a new country, that it wasn't what they expected, meaning that it isn't what a book said it would be"- Edward Said in *Orientalism*

Coming to America, I have felt on my own heart what W.E.B Dubois invoked: two souls, two thoughts in one dark body.' But now at the tail end of the century, perhaps there are many souls, many voices in one dark body- Meena Alexander in *The Shock of Arrival*

Who is an Arab-American? In simple terms the name Arab-American is part of the group of immigrants living in America, people of diverse background with stories of war, exile, lost language, cherished tradition and the need for reinventing home and self. An Arab- American is an immigrant or American born, a Muslim, Christian or Jew.

Nowadays, an Arab-American is sometimes a person faced with negative stereotypes especially after the 9/11 and the Iraq war, a turning point for Americans and those people of Middle Eastern origins.

Many Arabs and Muslims experienced increased hostility and suspicion after the September 11th. Many a time they are targeted on the basis of skin color, dress, name, accent and other characteristics. This has become institutionalized in the pervasive racial profiling in places like the US Airports and border crossings.

But these along with the other political events that culminated with the 9/11 and beyond forced Arab-Americans to grapple with their identity. They realized that they had to "write or be written". You have to "define yourself or others will define you". The result is that Arab-American writers are now carving out a new role in America just like African Americans or Asian Americans. Now these writers are coming to the foreground, creating new spaces for their voices and new urgencies of expression.

Some Characteristics of Arab-American Diasporic Writings

Arab-American writings share much with post colonial/diasporic writings. Like them, Arab-American literature also has its origin in the credibility and acceptance of the principles of change: social, psychological and linguistic changes. To absorb these changes involves an immense conscious effort on the part of these people to break with the old in search of the new, to break with establishment and the tradition. They struggle to establish an alternating identity; feeling conflicted between the old and the new. The writers address these issues in a direct, sometimes in a confrontational manner through their poems and stories.

It is not merely a matter of adapting to a new environment, or adjusting to customs, of learning a new language. It is much more profound, a displacement so far reaching. It is an agonizing process of alienation and displacement on the part of an Arab-American.

Negotiating a New Social and Literary Space

Caught between two worlds, the characters negotiate a new social space, caught between two cultures and often languages; the writer also negotiates a new literary space. "Doubleness" is the essence of their writings. Like the post colonial, diasporic literature, Arab-American writings capture the two invariables of their experience: exile and homeland. All diasporic literature is an attempt to negotiate between these two polarities. These writings undertake two moves, one temporal and the other spatial. It is as Meena Alexander puts, 'writing in search of a homeland' (1993:4).

The temporal move is a looking back at the past and looking forward to a future. According to Pramod K Nayar, "It produces nostalgia, memory, and reclamation as literary themes... [Here] the writer looks forward to the future, seeking new vistas, new chances. This produces themes of the ethics of work, survival, and cultural assimilation" (2008: 188).

Poetry and Arab-American Writers

Poetry is the fundamental Arab literary form and it has continued to provide some of the most powerful Arab-American voices. In ancient times poems were committed to memory and recited by nomadic tribes. A major theme was the lament for the desert encampment that had been abandoned or left behind, a recurring theme even today as these writers long for a homeland they may have been forced to leave.

Most of the poems written by Arab-Americans are of personal nature. They centre on culture, race and ethnicity. On the one hand they see themselves as Americans. On the other hand they still identify them with their countries of origin and try to cling proudly to their native lands.

Sam Hamod

Sam Hamod, Naomi Shihab Nye, Mohja Kahf, Suheir Hammed and Nathali Handel are some of the Arab-American poets who have tried to examine the essential Arab identity that had been lost during generations of assimilation. Since the 1960s, Sam Hamod has published poetry about his country of origin, Lebanon, as well as the Middle East in general. He was one of the first writers who have given a literary voice to Muslim Arab-American experience.

In the poem, "Dying with the Wrong Name" a landmark poem that has been translated into over twenty different languages for what it says about Arab-American, and all others who lost their names upon arrival at Ellis Island in the late 1800's and 1900's. The poem communicates the dramatic effect of loss and identity for the immigrants, their children and grandchildren. To quote from the poem:

Na'aim Jazeeny, from the beautiful valley
Of Jezzine, died as Nephew Sam,
Sine Hussein died without relatives and

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Because they cut away his last name
At Ellis Island, there was no way to trace
Him back even to Lebanon... (Lines 1-7).

Your Identity is Sealed with the Wrong Name!

Your name, your identity is “cut” off. But it is not merely your name that is removed. To quote from the poem again, “the loss of your name/cuts away some other part, /something unspeakable is lost” (21-23) “There is something lost down to the bone/in these small changes” (11-13). A man in a dark blue suit at Ellis Island says with /tiredness and authority, “You only need two/names in America’ and suddenly – as clearly /as the air you’ve lost/your name’ (Dying with the Wrong Name, 19). Hamod uses the second person to identify an Arab-American: “you move/about as an American” (19-20). You drive your Ford, You run your business ‘a cigar store in Michigan City, and /in the back room a poker game with chips and/bills...” (27-29). You may procure employment at a factory, one of the “packinghouses in Sioux Falls/and Sioux City, “before ending up in Gary, Indiana (32-33). You work hard, conform to the “American dream” and may even develop a degree of prosperity, “from/nothing to houses and apartments worth more than/a million- in each sweaty day in Sioux City” (33-35). You listen to the same kinds of music as other Americans, “B.B. King and T-Bone Walker” (39). You “buy time”: “each dollar another day mixing names and money” (40). And then you die to be buried “under/a stone carved in English” (47-48). But the language is not right, and neither the names:

...the Arabic of Hussein Hamod Subh,
Na’aim Jazeeny, Sine Hussein
Lost
Each one sealed away
With the wrong name (48-52)

Fusion Within Bifurcated Identity

In the final analysis, the “world comes together”. American and Lebanon fuse within the immigrant’s bifurcated identity:

Sine Hussein is still sitting in that
Old chair, upholstered in brushed maroon wool...
You know the smell, the smell of this room, meat and fried onions,
Fresh garlic on the salad, tartness o lemon
Twists into the air, and an ease toward evening
As you walk in
All the silence splits into hellos and hugs
While the world comes together
In the small room (56-72)

Slowly you get assimilated. You find that English words (i.e. “Hello”) are useful. You start enjoying the new land, food and the rift is somewhat healed. All of a sudden, you

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remember eating “fatiyah” with your forebears who came to America in 1914. Two realities exist; one is America and the other Lebanon, “that other reality, where his name, that /language.

The Hybrid Identity and Grape Leaves

In Hamod’s “Leaves”, anthologized in *Unsettling America*, he uses concrete images to show the hybrid identity in an American family. As the poem opens, Sam and “Sally” are cooking a traditional Mediterranean dish: stuffed grape leaves. The leaves are depicted as icons of heritage; cultural emblems, which must be cherished:

...we get out a package, its
Drying out, I’ve been saving it in the freezer, it’s
One of the last things my father ever picked in this life...
We just kept finding packages of them in the
Freezer, as if he were still picking them (lines 2-8)

Here, Hamod is drawing a parallel between ethnicity and grape leaves. Just as heritage goes on and on, so do the grape leaves; they are symbolic. His father, defender of the “faith”, takes extra precautions for their preservation, “packing them/carefully. “So they don’t “break into pieces” (9-11).

Besides this, Hamod’s father himself emerges as a figure representing an entire culture. The truth is that there is that very little about him is American. He speaks and writes broken English in a heavy accent: “To my Dar Carnchildn/David and Laura/From Thr Jido” (12-14). On the contrary, his Arabic letters are strewn everywhere in the upstairs storage.

But the marks of Americanization are still found in him. To quote him again, “English lettering/hard for him to even point” is “one of the few pieces of American/my father ever wrote” (lines 17-21). The language is described as “American” rather than English. It is actually culture, the hybrid identity, that is being depicted here, though his father’s “American” qualities are rather inadequate, compared to his Lebanese background. Hamod ends the poem with a strong sense of ethnic identity: “Even now, at night, I sometimes/get out of the Arabic grammar book/Though it seems so late” (32-34)

Visiting and Revising Dual Identity

Hamod’s “After the Funeral of Assam Hamady”, also anthologized in *Unsettling America* depicts this hybrid/dual identity again. Here, Hamod breaks the traditional poetic form in providing a voice for several characters with the structure of a screen play. The cast of 5 characters is unique with all the characters speaking in the poem, with clarity as to who is speaking and when, each with their own characteristics. The poem begins like a play:

Cast:

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Haj Abbass Habhad: My grandfather
Sine Hussain: and old friend of my father
Hussein Hamod Subh: my father
Me

6 p.m
Middle of South Dakota (lines 1-7)

The Process of Losangelization

The opening line suggests the impact America has upon the “cast”. Therefore being part of a film suggests 'Losangelization' has taken place. However, it also points out something unnatural, unreal, or fake about the roles that the cast plays. Here the Arab-American is not a real American but merely an actor who tries to imitate. The idea of being part of a movie recurs throughout the poem, with short stanzas that emphasize the quickness and scene-like quality of the scenario, like a fast-paced movie that slips from one piece of action to another.

The narrator is driving a 1950 Lincoln, an American car. Significantly the model is named after the famous President Abraham Lincoln. The narrator carries a “Navajo blanket” with him. Although Navajo may not typically seem “middle American” to most readers, they are part of the broader category that represents the oldest residents of the land, and they certainly have nothing to do with Hamod’s country of origin, Lebanon; he has adopted an American emblem.

Differences between Generations

But a difference exists between Hamod and the older generation. They are not as americanized as he is: their ties to the home land remain stronger. As they drive back from the funeral, they demand that Hamod pull over along the side of the road so that they can get out and pray, which is the main action of the poem:

“STOP THIS CAR RIGHT NOW!” Hajj Abbass
Grabbing my arm from the back seat
Hysht Iyat? (What’re you yelling about?)” – My Father
: Shu Bikkee?” (What’s happening?)- Sine Hussin

I stop
“It’s time to pray” – the Hajj (17-21)

While the older generation begins to pray, the narrator does not join them and instead remains, “sitting behind the wheel” while “car lights scream by” (29-31).

Loasangelization (Americanization) has influenced him so much that he cannot endure the nuisance of maintaining the inconvenient traditions from his homeland. They urge him to join, but he refuses: “Hamod! Get over her, to pray! /No, I’ll watch /and stand

guard” (41-43). In this stanza, punctuation disappears, building suspense and quickening the pace of the action.

The whole scene is punctuated with irony and humor. Hamod writes:

Three old men
Chanting the Qur’an in the middle
Of a South Dakota night
Allah Akbar
Allah Akbar
In high strained voices they chant
More cars flash by...
I’m embarrassed to be with them (58-73)

Faith Transcendent

In contrast to his youthful embarrassment at the scene, in retrospect Hamod views the faith of the older men as something transcendent and redemptive. "I always liked trips, travelling at high speed," he writes, "but they have surely passed me/as I am standing here now/trying so hard to join them/on that old prayer blanket- /as if the pain behind my eyes/could be absolution" (Dying, 16).

While the narrator is embarrassed by this incident, even to the family patriarchs maintaining the old ways seems to be difficult. Their voices are “strained”. Continuing old traditions are not easy in the new world. The choice of the word “strain” recurs further in the poem, but this time it is applicable to an American: “people stream by, an old woman strains a gawk at them” (76). It is significant that she too is of an older generation. Hamod suggests that older people get “set in their ways” and lose the freedom to look at the world and at each other objectively, to try new things and to try for fresh ideas. In an ironic way, in spite of their cultural differences the lady and Hamod’s older companions are very much alike in this respect.

Ameen (Amen) to the Transition to the Past to the Present

The word “Ameen” uttered at the end with a heavy accent reminiscent of the Middle East, signals a transition from the past to the present. Here, Hamod re-evaluates the past and concludes that he has missed something cultural. Some parts of his roots are gone and it fills him with longing and a desire for some degree of restoration.

I hear them still singing
As I travel half-way across
America
To another job
Burying my dead
I always liked trips, traveling at high speed
But they have surely passed me
As I am standing here now

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Trying so hard to join them
On that old prayer blanket-
As if the pain behind my eyes
Could be absolution (95-106)

Assimilate or Retain? Linguistic Aspects to the Fore

Here the tension between the need to assimilate and the need for one's own ethnic identity is delineated. The poet feels that his ancestors have outdone him, "passed" him along the road of life. He regrets missed opportunities to partake in the cultural practices of his countrymen and now those chances are lost forever. He wants to regain some of the old traditions but he cannot. Two realities exist side by side; one is America and the other Lebanon, "that other reality, where his name, that /language, Hussein, Sine Hussin, I'm a Brahim, Asalmu Aleikum/all of these sounds were part of his name, this was that other /edge of Lebanon he carried with him, that home" (86-89).

Even the sounds in names, each individual phoneme, are important. These linguistic aspects are a significant component to one's cultural identity. Hamod in the poem indirectly emphasizes that the Lebanese identity has not been lost despite other changes; rather, the two identities have been merged. The poem, in fact, captures a very strange state of the diasporic/immigrant individual as the poet seeks to two cultures and languages without abandoning either. A central theme in diasporic writings including the Arab-American writings is the negotiation of new identities.

Identity in Limbo

Another poem by Hamod in the anthology is entitled "from Moving" where the poet says that the hybrid identity forces one into a sort of limbo where one never stops moving. The character develops a split-consciousness of being an Arab-American and American.

The poem uses extended metaphor of being lost at sea to describe the experience of emigrating from one country to another. The poem's title, "from Moving", indicates the after effect of moving from one's native land to another, the agony of "uprooting and re-rooting". The poet has used spaces between select words:

So we move now
My new wife and I, my children
Move further away like lost
Shipmates crying to me for help (Lines 1-4)

Hamod uses italics and quotation marks to emphasize key terms. The poem ends with extra spaces between words that continue to play up the idea of separation:

Before them
Everyone everything stuck together things stayed
And when they moved grandmothers fathers (26-29)

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Here the poem ends abruptly indicating that the family members have lost contact for good now. They have floated away in the currents, out of sight of each other. "Out of sight, out of mind" This indirectly means that when one immigrates to a new country, one leaves behind many things that had been very dear.

Naomi Shihab: Making Space for Change

Palestinian American Naomi Shihab is another poet who affirms and gives voice to Arab culture and tradition while at the same time making space for change. Nye, daughter of a Palestinian Muslim father and an American Christian mother, is one of the most well known Arab-American authors: a prolific writer who has earned an avid readership among Arab-American and mainstream American audiences, children and adults, Nye has managed to bring Arab culture and politics into the US sphere in a deeply humanistic fashion.

According to her Arab-American identity "is not something to be preserved or denied or escaped or romanticized: it is just another way of being a human. In language that is readily accessible to a mainstream US readership, Nye creates spaces in which Arab and Arab-American experiences can be articulated, not through nostalgic reclamation, but by honoring the diversity of experience and the necessity of change.

The Process of Becoming

In her poetry, Nye dismantles the idea of a self that is static and stable, and insists instead on a selfhood as a process of becoming and discovering. In the poem "Half and Half", for instance, she addresses the dynamics of bifurcated identity. The poem closes with a resonant image of inclusiveness: "A woman opens a window – here and here and here- She is making a soup from what she had left/in the bowl, the shriveled garlic and bent beans./ She is leaving nothing out" (19, Varieties, 97)

Palestinian Experience of Tragedies

Nye also addresses the darker side of Arab-American and Palestinian experience – stereotypes, racism, political tragedies – exploring what it means to have a cultural inheritance that is not always easy or positive. In the poem "Blood" she narrates a childhood experience: "a girl who knocked on her door and "wanted to see the Arab". Nye says they didn't have one. After that she says, her father told who he was: "Shihab"- shooting star'-/ a good name, borrowed from the sky" (19 Varieties, 136).

What Does It Mean to be a True Arab?

But the poem then moves from a light hearted consideration of possibilities offered by her father's folktales of being a "true Arab" to a deeply troubled questioning of the implications and responsibilities of this identity. What does it mean to be a "true Arab", especially in the context of political tragedy (in the case of this poem, the 1982 massacre of Palestinians in the Sabra and Chatile camps in Beirut).

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As Nye asks at the end of the poem, "What does a true Arab do now?" (137). The painful resonance of this final question lies precisely in her inability to answer it. The gift of heritage, Nye makes clear, is also a warning; notions of "true" identity are easily reified into the hard lines of absolutes that lead to bloodsheds. What matters, she suggests, is not one's ethnic identity, as much as the cares and concerns one human extends to another. Through her poetry, Nye creates spaces in which Arab and Arab-American experience can be articulated, not through nostalgic reclamation, but by honoring the diversity of experience and the necessity of change.

Cultural Schism Experienced by Children of Immigrants

Mohja Kahf, a Syrian American poet has also emerged as a vibrant voice representing the Arab-Americans. Kahf's poems explore the cultural schism experienced by the children of immigrants.

In a poem called "The Passing There" that refers to the Robert Frost poem "The Road Not Taken" Kahf describes crossing an Indian field with her brother in search of raspberry bushes. The farmer who owns the field is "no Robert Frost/although he spoke colloquial". He curses the children, his epithets "express[ing] his concern /about our religion and ethnic origin" (Emails, 18).

This childhood incident becomes, for Kahf an emblem of her life in the new world- her positioning in, but not quite of, the American landscape. In the Syrian life, she might have had, "other purples waited, a plum tree had our name on it"; the vineyard watchman "chases away/children whose names he knew- our parallel- universe Syrian selves among them" (19). But in Indiana, "My brother and I crossed through a field. Its golden music weren't ours" (19).

Caught between the competing requirements of memory and amnesia, the conflicting pull of the old and the new land, the children navigate mutually exclusive worlds.

A Difficult Co-existence

What Kahf takes from this duality is not just the wrenching apart, but also a necessary, if difficult, co-existence. The Indiana field is superimposed on the Syrian field; cornfield choirs and Arabic anthems come together in unlikely but vibrant counterpoint. At the poem's conclusion, the echoes of Frost make clear that the new world's claims are ineluctably present, imbuing the structures of language as well as of identity: 'My brother knows this song:/How we have been running/to leap the gulf between two worlds, each/with its claim. Impossible for us/to choose one over the other, /and the passing there/makes all the difference" (20)

Here Kahf does not just absorb and reflect the Frost dictum: she transforms it. For her, as for other Arab-Americans, it is not a matter of choosing one world over the other, Arab or American. She insists that Arab-American identity exists at the point of crossing: the hyphen linking cultures, the gulf between two worlds. Hers is not the

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dream of univocal identity, feet firmly rooted on one side of the divide, but rather the messy reality of hands strained with American berries, shoulders limned Syrian dust. Kahf knows that it is not the choosing of one path as Frost would have it, but the passing between both that makes all the difference.

Integrating Arab and American Identities in the Individual through Language

Kahf's integration of Arab and American identity occurs partly through language. Her writing draws on both American colloquialisms and Quranic suras; it is informed by American free verse, with its tendency towards tonal subtleties and understated imagery, yet is imbued with an energy that draws on the heart of the Arabic oral tradition and Arabic poetry.

At times, Kahf is very explicit about her intention to sue Arabic influences to revitalize the English language. In "Copulation in English" she writes : "We are going to dip English backward/by its Shakespearean tresses/arcng its spine like a crescent/We are going to rewrite English in Arabic" (` 71).

Drawing on Arabic not just for specific images and words, but also for its sheer exuberance, Kahf celebrates Arabic language and culture and identity even as she creates a new language that can negotiate the passage between Arab and American making space for both without any apology. Although the lyric mode preferred by older writers continues, contemporary writers are increasingly creating a new diction for the expression of Arab- American realities.

Suheir Hammad: Linking National and International Contexts through Justice

Suheir Hammad is yet another Arab- American contemporary voices. Her writing links national and international contexts, moves from rage against sexual violence to anguish over Palestinian suffering to Arab- American experiences to social justice issues in the U.S. Narrating the violations which Palestinians have endured as well as the racism encountered by Arab- Americans, she also engages directly with cultural self-criticism, critiquing sexism and racism within Arab communities. And she insists that U.S readers acknowledge their own historical legacies of violation against Native Americans. In her poem "In America" she writes, "Right now you are standing on stolen land no matter where you are reading this poem" (<http://www.suheirhammad.com>;accessed Jan.21, 2007).

An Enduring Search for Home

Like many Arab- American writers, Hammad also articulates a search for home – a home located beyond the dual legacy of violence in the Middle East and exclusion in the U. S.and a search for an identity in a foreign land. In a poem captioned "Broken and Beirut", she focuses on the connections between a history of violence and oppression, and the need to recreate both self and world.

The poem begins by invoking the Palestinian experience of war and massive destruction: "people blown apart burned alive/flesh and blood all mixed together/a sight

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no human being can take/and yet we take and take..." Yet out of this horror of piecing together body parts from the rubble, she holds out the possibility of finding- or creating- some vision of home and self.

Tired of "taking fear and calling it life," as he puts it, she longs to go home to a place beyond pain, bombs and wars. "I want to remember what I've never lived," she writes, "a home within me within us/where honey is offered from my belly---return to what we've forgotten.../to the drum the hum the sum of my parts.". This is not an escapist notion: it requires work, imagination and memory. But out of it comes something fruitful and hopeful: "honey/on the lips of survivors" ("Born Palestinian", 97).

Nathalie Handal: On Arab Exilic Experience Around the World

Nathalie Handal is yet another Arab-American poet of Palestinian origin who is worth considering. Like Hammad, she also brings an extra dimension of exile that is covered by Palestinian experience. She also negotiates questions of identity, community and selfhood within the framework of Palestinian exile. Her poetry is different from Hammad in the sense that she deals with the question of dual identity not just on U.S. soil but also in the whole world.

Her first collection of poems, *The Never Field* deals with the classic journey of the exile through memory and history in search of both home and selfhood, arriving eventually at an imaginary home where language holds up the hope of transfiguring historical and personal realities. Her second collection, *The Lives of Rain*, shows the different faces of exile and Palestinian experiences. The book's opening poem, "The Doors of Exile" is a portrayal of the tragic condition of exile: "the shadows close a door/this is loneliness:/every time we enter a new room" (1).

Other poems talk about the traumas of war and occupation especially on the survivors and mental agony that of those who suffer when they speak of their own historical and personal realities. In the poem "Twelve deaths at Noon", the narrator asks, "When was the last time we looked at our reflections/and saw ourselves, not jars of eroded bones/not the small child in us looking for our burnt eyelashes. /When was the last time we slept without dreaming we died,/without wishing the killed dead, without looking for our gun/while making love?"(15)

From Palestine, the poem moves to North Africa, South and North America. Languages and places shift and collide, creating a sense of both gain and loss: Arabic and Spanish and French and English, Morocco and Mexico and the Caribbean and the Balkans and Miami and New York. However, these linguistic and cultural shifts provide only some stop-gap arrangements: as she "travel[s] and move[s]/from one continent to next, move, to be whole"(36). According to Handal "Home is who we are" ("Baladana, 33) but home keeps moving and it is not within one's grasp. She stands "at the corner of a small road somewhere between my grandfather and what seems to be my present, "her identity remains something just out of reach: we write a ballad to celebrate ourselves, baladna, and wonder, is that what it's like/to dance in Arabic?" (33).

City of Lights and City of Black-outs

In the poem "Amrika", Handal asks, "does one begin to understand the difference/between Sabaah el khyr and bonjour, /the difference between the city of lights and black-outs"? (58). In the face of throats "swollen with history"(59), it is a question without answer. Yet in the final section of the poem, "Debke in Ne w York" there is a sort of homecoming. She says, " I arrive...I wear jeans, tennis shoes, walk Broadway, pass Columbia, read Said and Twai...recite a verse by Ibn Arabi/and between subway rides to the place I now call home, listen to Abel Halim and Nina Simone" (63-64). The arrival seems to be of fragmentations but the resonance is cumulative. The poem concludes: "It is later than it was a while ago...and I haven't moved a bit,/my voice still breaking into tiny pieces/when I introduce myself to someone new/and imagine I have found my way home" (64)

Recurring Themes Unite Arab-American Poets

In the final analysis what unite this body of Arab-American poets into one literary system are partially the recurring themes, often in binary oppositions, which permeate it: acculturation, duality, discrimination, alienation between parents and children, memories of war, poverty and prosperity. They all reflect both the diversity of the Arab cultural roots on which they draw and the diverse ways in which these cultural roots play out in the U.S. For some writers, Arab-American literature will always be about the narrative of leaving behind one identity and acquiring a new one. For others, Arab-American literature has global implications where there is a possibility of a cultural reinvigoration. All of them agree on one thing that Arab- American ethnicity and expression is a matter not just of the past, but of the present and the future

Arab-Americans have been writing stories and poems for more than a century, and increasingly the stories that they make seek to remake the world they live in. The world that emerges is a multicultural one, made of many cultural strands. In her memoir, the language of Baklava, Diana Abu-Jaber asks, "Why must there be only one home?" (328). It seems to be a question that echoes throughout Arab-American literature.

As one examines the evolution of Arab-American literature over a century, it is obvious that Arab- American authors have moved from a stance of defensiveness to self-assertion, producing literary texts that speak to their own realities and chart a space for their voices. In their work it is evident that if "home" is finally only possible in the imagination, it is nonetheless a space with infinite possibilities even when the Arab-Americans are negotiating the boundaries.

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