

***POST GIBRAN: AN ANTHOLOGY OF NEW ARAB
AMERICAN WRITING, BY KHALID MATTAWA &
MUNIR AKASH, EDS. PP.460. MARYLAND: KITAB,
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Post Gibran: An Anthology of New Arab American Writing is a work that is bound to inject more life into the area of Arab-American writing since it continues the efforts towards legitimizing Arab American literature, particularly after the publication of Gregory Orfalea and Sharif Elmusa, *Grape Leaves: A Century of Arab American Poetry* (1988) and Joanna Kadi, *Food for Our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists* (1994). *Post Gibran* is a collection of writings by 37 authors, with brief biographical notes at the end of the volume indicating each author's background and interests. Even though one can describe the work as a hybrid of genres and modes of writing, poetry collections predominate, followed by short story collections and, to a lesser extent, novels. The work includes excerpts from hitherto unpublished novels, memoirs, autobiography, essays, and translations, but only one dramatic work. The introduction to the anthology sheds light on the specificity of Arab American writers' experience and acknowledges the dual and conflicting role involved in being Arab as well as American. According to the editors of the anthology, the collection contains new and unpublished work that confronts "issues Arab-American writers have not tackled in the past" (p. xii). Since the Arabness of American Arabs has already been established, the aim of the anthology is to project the manner these writers understand their "Americanness" without relinquishing their Arab roots. In other words, as Lisa Majaj puts it in her illuminating and informative article entitled "New Directions: Arab American Writing at Century's End", Arab Americans need to develop their identity and "move beyond cultural preservation toward transformation" (p. 71).

If poems by both men and women dominate the scene, memoirs and autobiographies are predominantly monopolized by women writers such as Diana Abu Jaber's *Memories of Birth* that depicts her life as a child in Beit al-Salaam Palestinian refugee camp: "It was hidden away, far from roads

or markets We began with bare ground and tents, which eventually grew stone sides and cement floors" (p. 5). Other works include Elmaz Abi Nader's journal that describes various tours in the Arab world, Evelyne Accad's cancer journal as well as Patricia Sarrafian Ward's memoirs of her experience in war Lebanon. The volume includes translations of works by Mahmoud Darwish, Youssef Habshi al-Ashkar, Munir Akash, Amira al-Zein, and Halim Barakat

In "New Directions," Majaj notes the general wistful longing that characterizes Arab-American writing and sees the need "to turn away from nostalgic celebration toward more rigorous and self-critical explorations ... away from lyric compression of poetry toward the more expansive and explanatory medium of prose" (p. 71). In her view, the predominance of lyrical poetry can be attributed to "intrinsic Arab cultural propensity towards poetry" (p. 69) and to the fact that the lyric is a mode that can easily accommodate "nostalgic celebrations of family and community" as well as "anguished depictions of war and suffering" (69-70), both of which feature in Arab American poetry. Since many of the works deal with displacement, be it from Palestine, Lebanon, or other Arab countries, the initial reaction to relocation is to grieve for the lost home and all that is associated with it - family, friends, security, comfort and a familiar and fixed self. Since the subject views himself in the past, the present remains a site of estrangement, exile and liminality. In "Sixty Minutes: A Poem and a Journal," the speaker in Elmaz Abinader's poem admits that every night she watches the "moon that passed across Lebanon/ Before it came to this [American] sky" (p. 22). Similarly, Diana Abu Jaber's words after being displaced from her homeland - "I was cut off from history and memory, and even perhaps, from soul" (p. 2) - reveal a similar sense of dislocation and inability to live a healthy present. In these texts, selfhood is determined by the nostalgic freezing of a particular moment that determines national identity through the idealization of the past. The home serves as the site of origin, and as a place for recovering the stability of the self.

The trajectory from the Arab world to America is marked by a signifier which is embodied in the past tense, and thus a large portion of this migrant literature represents a geographic, cultural and political retreat. The literature reveals a continuous contact with Arab culture through the temporal and spatial configuration of the homeland. Many of these texts use nostalgic rhetorical strategies and idealize the homeland producing a

romanticized version of it as seen in Abu Jaber's lyrical recollections that reveal a strong sense of loss and alienation. Again this strong sense of yearning wistfulness and nostalgia can be perceived in Natalie Handal's assertion: "I grew up in a house where Palestine was at every corner of our hearts.... Palestine was so present in my memory, or rather in the memory of others that I borrowed. It seemed so right to belong to all those stories my grandfather spoke about" (p. 140). In many of these texts the homeland is strongly associated with music, dance and song. For instance, the speaker in Pauline Kaldas's poem "From a Distance Born" remembers Aswan market: "a man sits at the marina's edge / his arm a seesaw on the rababa." Similarly, the speaker in Paula Haydar's poem "Picture Us" recalls Fairuz's voice, while Khalid Mattawa recollects old songs from his "native Libya one song always holds my attention... The small band of violin, oud, tabla, and qanoon players, chugs its way into the melody ... the singer begins a love song about meeting the beloved on the street He sings a few lines, then the song halts to a mawal, a vocal solo accompanied by spontaneous musical responses" (p. 50). Furthermore, the homeland is represented as an exotic space which is highlighted through sensuous imagery and which is highly charged with a strong historical sense. Samuel Hazo's "The Egyptian Movie Star" is a case in point:

And so she ripened like an orchid
 waiting to be picked, her lashes
 inked with kohl, her earrings
 shimmering like tiny chandeliers
 her Cleopatra-bracelets by the dozen
 adding splendor on splendor to splendor.

For other writers, the homeland is seen as a matriarchal world, a world where mother earth is vanquished and abused by the conqueror. In recollecting the homeland, Abu Jaber looks for her mother: "Where are you, Mother," I ask. "What happened to you? She allows me to look into her face and I see tears like branches of water, the muscles of her face smooth as earth, her eyes dark as dates, her hair a fall, a cave, a valley shadow" (p. 3). The loss of this stable point of reference means acknowledging a displaced and highly estranged subject. As Edward Said tells Nubar Hovspian, exile is "the most horrible fate, a permanent fall from paradise."¹

1. In Michael Sprinker (ed.) (1992). *Edward Said: A Cultural Reader*, Blackwell, Oxford: p.5.

In some works such as Patricia Sarrafian Ward's *The Bullet Collection*, the events of the past are developed not through recounting the officially recorded historical events which led to the political turmoil, but through remembering the daily struggles in the home when the family desperately needed to leave the country. Other representations of the homeland are realistic descriptions to the extent that in poetry they are almost akin to prose. This strategy has the function of underlining the solid impact of the past on the present. One example is in the poem "Hamza Aweiwi: A Shoe Salesman in Hebron":

He has tanks on the roof.
Some days he manages to shave,
or his wife prepares the tea kettle.
But he knows the price of water.
It's holy, hard to come by.

Outside his shop, fat and bold,
an electrician with seven children
admits he does not wash his clothes. (p. 245)

In many ways, some of these works serve as translators and propagators of their culture as seen in Elmaz Abinader's diary of her travels in the Middle East that provides information with general comments on moral and social values, and in Diana Abu Jaber's "The Way Back: Memories of Birth."

Despite the dominance of the past, it is clear that in some texts the present tense prevails. This is a trait aimed not so much on focusing on the present, but rather on resurrecting the past into the present. In Pauline Kaldas's poem "From a Distance Born" the speaker addresses her as yet unborn baby:

From your father's hand pressed tight into mine
dark musk smell
mixture of incense, coconut traced to
Aswan market street, dusk light
burlap bags rolled open: sassafras, hibiscus,
smell of peanuts roasted in sand
a breath walking on the wind

A man sits at the marina's edge,
his arm a seesaw on the rababa

Far from erasing the past, the use of the present tense remains a strategy by the speaker to enhance the past experience by re-enacting it in the present tense. At the same time, since the represented writers appear to be engaged in settling the question of who they are by resorting to their common past, it is natural that the texts represented in the anthology have a strong communal public flavor rather a personal and individualistic orientation.

The metaphor of the journey which encompasses the experience of cultural dislocation dominates the scene though for some writers the journey outside and back home is one of estrangement and a feeling that somewhere along the way the original abode had been lost. In his poem entitled "Innocent Bystanders are Neither Innocent nor Bystanders" Samuel Hazo writes:

To feel much less alone
you'll travel to decountrify yourself
confide in sympathetic strangers
and return to what's no longer
quite the same as home. (p. 14)

In many of these works, the journey is taken in order to regain ancestral lands or lose them, and to find answers to the pressing questions of identity. Names of places punctuate these texts to highlight the centrality of place, and space in Arab American literature. For instance, Elmaz Abinader writes: "How to answer all the questions about who I am My home is San Jose. And has been a number of other places I can imagine as I cross country to get to Kennedy airport. The Rockies of my western Colorado life weighs under the heaviest snowfall in years. The farmland in Nebraska fades gray under the slate sky. My Lebanese mother and father sit in their western Pennsylvania house with drapes drawn against their windows" (pp. 24-25).

Travel seems to be essential as manifested in the central image of the airport. For Natalie Handal, for instance, to be Palestinian is to be from "somewhere where I constantly have extra luggage...living in between skylines. It is 'wandering one's whole life among foreign tribes'" (p. 143).

In her view, we travel to feel at "peace with a part of our identity" (p. 141). In other words, many of these texts attempt to establish a relationship between place and identity, and place as a sense of belonging and recourse to the past. Accordingly, geographical places are viewed by some writers as bounded, fixed and strongly associated with an enclosed security, providing stable and simple answers to the question of identity formation.

Many of these works explore experiences of marginalization not only from American society but from Arab communities as well. In some of these texts the homeland turns out to be more alien than their adopted home. In her autobiographical poem entitled "Fraudulent Acts", Paula Kaldes asserts that "the waiter in Felfela" takes her for a "European woman" (Pauline Kaldas, p. 237). Similarly, in Joe Geha's "Back in the Black", a novel in progress, the narrator feels alienated in his homeland: "I didn't belong here [Lebanon], and everyone seemed to know it. Cab drivers could tell I was an American." (Joe Geha, p.320). Natalie Handal goes a step further to highlight her sense of estrangement in both the homeland and the adopted land: "You were born in America, grew up in Jordan, studied in Beirut, and the Arabs still make you feel American. And of course the Americans consider you Arab." She does not see a unified identity, but rather perceives herself as hanging on the "invisible strings of identity" (139-40). With no fixed position in either symbolic system, her identity remains divided and in flux.

Many of these texts reveal a sense of being pulled by their Arab as well as American identities. Failing to identify exclusively with either culture, their works reveal self-division. Instead of dismissing the complexities generated by the clash between cultures or simplifying them, many writers weave these contradictions into their texts to arrive at a more expansive though precarious inscription of identity. For instance, Handal writes: "The fact that inconsistency exists concerning identity, doesn't that in a way answer the question that nothing can be categorized so definitely?" (pp. 142-43). Many of these authors see no other alternative but to struggle to locate themselves within the diverse and contradictory discourse of western tradition and Arab culture. In other words, they work within the precincts of the western culture while at the same time reclaiming thematic and political connections with a national background.

Other works challenge the stereotyping of Arabs in American culture and attempt to confront and interrogate them. The stereotyping of the Arab as

a terrorist is a case in point. For instance the speaker in Elmaz Abinader's "Sixty Minutes: a Poem and a Journal" addresses her American lover:

You remembered that I am an Arab when you saw them
[hezbollah] on T.V., when you saw their chests heave. Their eyes
waver, their foreheads crease, their mouths roared—hands thrown
into the air."

At this moment, the speaker envisages her lover wondering if she herself has "had a suicide pact with someone" or "battle plan" (19), and ends the poem with a strong determination to resist attempts to construct Arabs like herself according to familiar orders and patterns:

But remember I am an Arab, too, looking for a home
of my own, unoccupied, without siege. (p. 22)

Likewise, in her journal entitled "Long Overdue", Naomi Shihab Nye reports a remark she had overheard an American anthropologist make thinking that Netanyahu had won the elections: "Good thing! He'll put those Arabs in their places. Arabs always want more than they deserve" (130).

Many of these authors go beyond their geographical boundaries in order to confront a new spatial configuration that bears down on the different aspects of their lives and the search for a home, and for a language that will allow them to reconfigure themselves. Place is seen as open, and constructed out of movement, communication, and social relations. Borders once thought to be stable become fluid and unfixed, while movement in these texts is expansive and liberating to the extent that it becomes a geography where one finds oneself. This movement back and forth between America and the Arab world has the function of challenging the legitimacy of national literature formations and initiating an alternative means of constructing national identities. As Mattawa asserts in "Freeways and Rest Houses: Towards an Arab Location on the American Cultural Map," when we "face our Arab literary and cultural heritage we will encounter misogyny, racism, and superstition, ideas that cannot simply survive in our time In our efforts to develop a cultural identity rather than mere ethnic identification, I think it is possible, and certainly worth our while, to engage the tribal, religious, and Medievalist perspectives of the Arabo-Islamic heritage in ways as to transmute them into forms of

existential idealism suitable for a secular, multicultural, democratic setting” (p. 59). Mattawa’s own brilliant poem “Ode to Mejnoon” is a case in point:

They think of you Mejnoon
 somewhere between jejune and moon
 struck roaming San Fernando
 starved and crazy about your cousin
 and your uncle will not let you
 marry the girl because mejnoon
 has no future in a rinky dink outfit
 telemarketing your life away (p. 62)

The poem exploits the double perspective that allows the poet to retain attachment to home, culture, and familiar self and yet shape a new self out of the materials and demands of the new environment. Furthermore, the poem undermines linguistic norms and gives voice to a double heritage through the mixing of codes whereby linguistic norms are undermined through the use of a mixture of English and Arabic. In the poem, Mattawa writes that the Arabic word “Majnoon” is “creeping into the lexicon/ Soon I’ll find you in Webster’s/somewhere between mad and melancholy.” (p. 62). Similarly, Sharif Elmusa’s touching poem “No Statues Were Built in the Camp” reveals the strong impact of the homeland on the displaced individual. Topography and autobiography merge with the author standing on the border between two cultures crossing in succession:

My mother stayed home,
 shepherded a pack of twelve,
 cleaned and yelled,
 and, for punishment,
 summoned father’s shadow.
 She stuffed our thin bones with sentiment,
 as if to make us immobile.
 The mud-brick hut wasn’t hers.
 The rain running barefoot in the streets
 wasn’t real. Her past was insatiable:
 The new house they had just built,
 with windows on four sides,
 windows tall and arched
 to let in the ample light,
 to spread out the prayers... (p. 100)

Though the past is stamped and “stuffed” in the memory by his father and mother, the speaker manages to take a detached and, at times, ironic stand to reveal his estrangement and retreat from the past. Similarly, Salah el-Moncef’s story entitled “A Tree with a Dream”, humorously describes the narrator’s Egyptian mother’s superstitious reaction to her daughter’s prosthetic leg, the fear that her daughter will not be able to bear children: “When it was obvious that all his scientific–esthetic arguments were wasted on her [his mother], when he realized there was no way he could convince her that there was no link whatsoever between synthetic material and the fertility of her daughter - - that as a matter of fact, the best way to make sure the young woman got inseminated in the first place was to supplement her fertility with the decent likeness of a leg - - he let Amina talk to her” (p. 299). Thus the protagonist manages to extricate himself from his mother’s world, and while adopting an understanding and tolerant attitude sees the shortcomings of her way of looking at the world.

One could go as far as to say that many of these works can be described as intellectual and imaginative journeyings highlighting geographical dislocation. As Gaston Bachelard asserts *In The Poetics of Space*, “words...are little houses.” The journeying person carries his words with him and reconstructs a new house of words. In her letter to Majaj, Handel asserts: “Lisa, remember when we saw each other in the middle of the river, the river between Palestine and poetry ... remember how the sky was memory, how green, so green it all was ... I remember this homeland.... As poets our words are our home, poetry our homeland” (p. 142).

One striking absence in this anthology is work related to gender issues or feminist concerns. One reason for this absence is attributed by Majaj to the fact that when “Arab and Arab-American women give voice to feminist concerns, they are often assumed, both by their own communities and by outside observers, to be rejecting their own cultural traditions in favor of a more ‘liberated’ western culture. Depending on the stance of the observer, this is viewed either as an escape or as a betrayal. The result of such over determined discourse has typically been a pressure toward silence” (p. 73). If this reveals their feeling that feminism is a Western construct, it does not rule out the fact that this fear is in itself detrimental to identity formation.

This is an anthology that should be on everyone's shelf. The works presented convey the complexity of forces at work in the negotiations between ethnic Arab tradition and mainstream America, and help to establish connection and communication between Arabs in the diaspora and Arabs in the homeland. This is a body of literature that not only deserves more attention in the Arab world, but also long overdue critical attention.

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