

## ادب المهجر واشكالية الهوية العربية الأمريكية

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### الملخص:

يركّز هذا البحث على ادب المهجر واشكالية الهوية العربية الأمريكية ولاسيما تطور الهوية العربية الأمريكية المبكرة من العربية إلى الأمريكية، واستكشاف مختلف الإنجازات والأعباء والحواجز التي منعتهم وأعاقتهم من الاندماج الفوري والكامل كأمركيين وكيف رافقهم أدبهم الذي تمت كتابته باللغة العربية في تقلباتهم عاكساً للأوضاع الاجتماعية والسياسية والاقتصادية التي كانوا يعانون منها. كما عمد البحث الى تتبع الموضوعات التي تم تمثيلها في الأدب العربي الأمريكي المبكر وكيف انعكست ثقافة الغرب في أدب العرب الأمريكيين الذين عاشوا في بيئة متعددة الإثنيات في الولايات المتحدة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: عربي-أمريكي، الأدب، الشرق، الغرب، شعر المهجر، ادب المهجر، مهاجر.

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# **Al-Mahjar Literature and the Problematic of the Arab-American Identity**

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## **Abstract**

This research is focusing on the development of the early Arab-American identity from being Arab to becoming American. It explores the numerous accomplishments, burdens and obstacles that have stifled this ethnicity and hampered it from a direct and thorough integration as American; and how their literature has accompanied them in their uncertainties reflecting the social, political and economic situations they were enduring. In addition to that, it attempts to trace the topics represented in the Early Arab-American literature and how the culture of the Occident was reflected in the literature of the Arab-Americans living in the multiethnic environment of the United States.

**Key words: Arab-American, literature, Orient, Occident, Almahjar poetry, Almahjar literature, immigrant.**

## **Al-Mahjar Literature and the Problematic of the Arab-American Identity**

The literature of the early Arab immigrants in the United States was framed and informed by the experiences of the Arab immigrants. One of the well-known facts about the Arabs is that they have always celebrated literature, especially poetry. Their history is rich in poetry that has accompanied them in their victories, defeats, stagnations, and many other life situations. The Arab literary figures, particularly poets, were like historians recording through their poetry the everyday life of the Arabs. The early Arab immigrants imported this tradition with them. Many Arab-American poets thematized the conditions of the early Arab immigrants in their literature. They were able to cultivate new forms of poetry writing that would reflect the accomplishments, burdens and barriers that have stifled this ethnicity.

The emphasis in this research is on the development of the early Arab-American identity from being Arab to becoming American, exploring the various accomplishments, burdens and barriers that have stifled this ethnicity and hindered it from an immediate and complete integration as American and how their literature, which was mostly written in Arabic, has accompanied them in their positive and negative experiences reflecting the social, political and economic situations they were enduring. Moreover, it attempts to trace the topics represented in the Early Arab-American literature and how the culture of the Occident was reflected in the literature of the Arab-Americans living in the multiethnic environment of the United States.

Identity is one of the essential elements in any ethnic discourse. The concept of identity refers to features of people such as their race, ethnicity,

nationality, gender, religion, or sexuality. It achieved prominence in the work of Erik Erikson (1968) who is a society and culture-oriented ego-psychologist who proposed that advanced identity formation should facilitate the ascendance of the ego strength of fidelity. The use of the term 'identity' reflects the belief that each person's identity - in the older sense of who he or she truly is - is deeply inflected by social features. And it is an undeniable fact of modern life that people have increasingly come to believe that this is so. In political and moral thinking, nowadays, it has become commonplace to suppose that a person's projects can reasonably be expected to be shaped by such features of their identity and that this is, if not morally required, then, at least morally acceptable. Each person's identity has at least two dimensions. There is a collective dimension, one that refers back to a group and cultural practices such as an ethnicity; but there is also what one might call a personal dimension, consisting of other socially important features of the person: intelligence, charm, wit, greed, that are not themselves the basis of forms of collective identity (Valverde, p. 18). The aspect of the collective dimension paves way to an ethnic belonging.

Ethnicity or ethnic group, by definition, stands for,

A collectivity within a larger society having real or putative common ancestry,

Memories of a shared historical past, and a cultural focus on one or more

symbolic elements defined as the epitome of their peoplehood.

Examples of

such symbolic elements are: kinship patterns, physical contiguity (as in localism

or sectionalism), religious affiliation, language or dialect forms, tribal

affiliation, nationality, phenotypal features, or many combinations of these. A

necessary accompaniment is some consciousness of kind among members of the

group. (Schermerhorn, p.12)

The concept of ethnicity both includes and excludes, simultaneously, certain people. It includes people in one group when the majority of the elements mentioned above are present among the individuals, and it excludes those who do not fit the description. However, it is very important to point out that the exclusion practiced in defining who does not belong is not the same as 'segregation' which is mostly affiliated with racism. Although ethnicity and race both refer to groups, they do not share the same constituents in their definitions of a group. Ethnicity, on the one hand, profoundly emphasizes mutual social, cultural, and linguistic elements and can include a phenotypal factor which is not a major one in defining who is or is not an ethnic member of a group. On the other hand, race emphasizes the phenotypal/physical element as the *differentia specifica* of distinction (Van Den Berghe, pp. 9-10). In other words, race can be included as one of the ethnic constituents but not vice versa and because of this equation, exclusion in ethnicity is different from segregation which is a racist act against certain individuals based on their innate physical appearance. However, the equation can be manipulated and used to raise issues of power and domination over other ethnicities. Ringer and Lawless, two experts on race relations and minority studies, believe that the treatment of racial minorities in America has been qualitatively different from that experienced by white immigrants; that racism is not a mere abnormality in

American society - largely confined to the South - but built into the very foundations of the society. They point out the manipulation in America saying,

The they-ness imputed to racial minorities by the dominant American society has been qualitatively different from the they-ness imputed to white ethnic minorities ... So imprinted has this differential treatment [of racial minorities in the United States] been onto the very foundations of the American society from the colonial period onward that we have constructed a theory of duality to account for this differential treatment. (p. 27)

These double standards in favoring one over the other or classifying minorities depending on racial constituents is what caused and deepened the rift within the American nation. The rift was between the controlling white group and the rest of the ethnicities. These ethnicities have immigrated and settled in the States which, in turn, resulted in a flurry of various theories put forward as possible and plausible solutions for the ethnic/racial conflicts.

One of those conceivable solutions was assimilation. The process of assimilation depended on several factors which had to be observed by the newcomers in order for them to assimilate. First, they had to adapt to the immediate surrounding environment of the host culture, then they were compelled to become familiar with the native language and interact more with indigenous people. After that, the immigrants needed to understand and appreciate the new cultural values that were offered to them by the host country (Horak, pp. 124-142). However, concepts of assimilation and the melting pot

were far from what was taking place in the real world, i.e., these concepts hold the newcomers solely responsible for integration and becoming part of the host country's social fabric.

Such concepts appear to be advocating a promised Utopia for the immigrants if they play by the rules, while the truth is that they were mere fictitious arbitrary creations of sociologists and politicians who were failing to understand the depth of the immigrants' problem that was not only experienced by one ethnicity but rather by the majority. As Said (1978) foregrounds, "it is perfectly possible to argue that some distinctive objects are made by the mind, and that these objects, while appearing to exist objectively, have only a fictional reality" (p. 54). This notion or pretence of coexistence, especially in a society of multiethnicity and tolerance or democracy, finds itself, whether intentionally or not, harboring contrapuntal elements: assimilation and exclusion, reconciliation and resistance, integration and segregation, compromise, and confrontation and so on; consequently, causing the centripetal-centrifugal trajectories to destabilize and undermine the claims of compromise and rapprochement. The result as Said (1978) highlighted was "a group of people living on a few acres of land will set up boundaries between their land and its immediate surroundings and the territory beyond, which they call 'the land of the barbarians'" (p. 54). A good example of this is the first wave of Arab settlers.

As immigration began, many of the first Arab settlers in America started out as peddlers who roamed the American cities, towns and rural areas. Most of them lived in settlements in very poor conditions; nevertheless, they were able to support one another and receive the new Arab immigrants. This style of life lasted all the way up the late 1940s when the Arab immigrants began accepting

the culture they lived in and the fact that they are being influenced and Americanized. They yielded to acculturation. The immigrants started out with an aim of just living as Arabs in the United States, but due to all the hard labor they had to put in and due to the similarities they generated between themselves and the American laborers, there was little place for inferiority according to some of their personal beliefs. Alixa Naff (1997) points out that the Syrian immigrants,

thought they perceived in the behavior of Americans they encountered on the roads and the settlements, a number of similarities with themselves. Most Americans, they observed, dressed simply, labored hard, attended church and lived by Christian values, visited neighbors, and lived frugally and morally. Since that is how they viewed themselves, the comparison generated little cause for inferiority. (p. 262)

Nevertheless, no matter how many similarities they tried to trace, there was always something impeding them from establishing a firm national connection with the nation that has offered them citizenship i.e., the United States. Despite the fact that they were “classified as whites by government definitions, they were excluded from discussions of white ethnicity and were popularly perceived as nonwhites” (Majaj, p. 320). First, they were perceived as whites, then as Caucasians, after that as Asiatic. Although the Arabs in America were “scientifically identified as Caucasians, their popular perception as nonwhite was so persuasive that courts were willing to privilege common knowledge over scientific evidence when the two were at odds” (Majaj, p. 322).



This racial classification was far worse especially in the segregated South. Arabs were often considered as colored regardless of the country of origin. Those who had earned American citizenship had difficulties in obtaining voting rights. A candidate for a local office in Birmingham in the 1920s passed out handbills that read “They have disqualified the Negro, an American citizen from voting in the white primary. The Greek and the Syrian should also be disqualified. I DON’T WANT THEIR VOTES. If I can’t be elected by white men, I don’t want the office” (Dehmer, pp. 38-39). This comes as no surprise to Said (1978), for he thinks that one of the reasons that have contributed to this negative view of the Arabs, especially the early 20<sup>th</sup>, is “the absence of any cultural position making it possible either to identify with or dispassionately to discuss the Arabs or Islam” (p. 27). In other words, there was no effort by the host country to attempt to understand the various cultural, social, religious, or economical histories of its newly claimed citizens. Instead, they were exploited and resented and lived a low social status which heightened ethnic feeling among the majority of the Arab-Americans.

This kind of view towards the Arab immigrants created a split among the immigrants. Some of them retreated to their own communities and tried to stay in the shadows, while the others tried to imitate the American way of life and character. The Americanization of some Arab minds produced a divide between those who began considering themselves Americanized and those who were still trying to hold on to their roots. Naff (1997) reports a conversation between an Americanized Syrian and a nationalist Syrian,

Americanized Syrian: Are you still a villager? Haven’t you become civilized?

Syrian Nationalist: Do good manners allow you to insult me this way when you

are pretending to be civilized?

Americanized Syrian: We alone know what it is to be civilized and we regret that you are not one of us [...]. Don't you understand that we are all intelligent? For when we become Americanized, we are able to earn more without working hard and we help each other by gaining greater prestige. (pp. 263-264)

These conflicts and confrontations were reflected in the Arab-American literature, in particular poetry, before World War II, because it was one of the traditions that the Arab poets and authors preserved, especially in the poetic discourse. It was the way they communicated their thoughts and sufferings to their families and friends in their native countries. This tradition is a very old one; there is "a belief in poetry that could be traced back to the lips of the pre-Islamic tribes; the poets of Phoenicia, such as Meleager of Tyre; and even back to the Canaanite authors of portions of the *Song of Songs*" (Orfalea and Elmusa, p. 2). Preserving this practice was one way of sustaining their identity and customs. They even wrote it in Arabic rather than English. After that they would translate it, or have it translated into English. As mentioned earlier, many of them had come with the intention of going back and that was one of the factors that kept some of them away from integrating with their social environment, thus resulting in their shying away from participating in American politics and settling in the shadows.

Al-Mahjar poetry, a phrase that refers to the literature of the immigrants, is a co-product of the East/Arab and the West/ the United States. It is a hybridization of the Arab sophism and the Western materialism. On the one hand, it is realistic as a result of the direct confrontation, and immediate contact, with the new status in the United States. The new landscape of suffering in the diaspora consolidates that realism. On the other hand, it is romantic because of the nostalgia and the desire for any escapist paraphernalia. Gregory Orphalea

and Sharif Elmusa (2000), editors of one of the few anthologies on Arab-American poetry, describe Al-Mahjar poetry as being intertextual owing to the intense exposition to all literary genres and influences that existed in the West such as the influence, not only of Romantic poets like Wordsworth, Keats and Blake, but of the American Transcendentalists: Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman. (pp. 1-17)

In general, Al-Mahjar poetry calls for renewal and resurrection. It is against the classical, the conventional and the conservative. This is not unexpected. Most of the poets came in touch with Europe and America through the Christian missionaries sent to the Arab countries. These poets, in the new land, felt free from all the classical restrictions concerning the composition of poetry. Much imagery was borrowed from nature, and they continually contrasted the natural world with the human world. They recognized nature as a rich store of symbols that provided both the emotional and intellectual apparatus for poetry. They stressed the sanctity of nature and celebrated it, learned from it and associated with it, not necessarily to explain it but to understand it and reveal it in action and thought, and above all in poetry:

This literature distinguishes itself by prioritizing time and the economy of expression. Gibran and Naimy are the best representatives. Gibran formulated the theory of emigrant literature and Naimy articulated its canon and rubric in his book *Al-Ghirbal* or *The Sieve*. (Al-Miwesh, p. 15)

The major characteristics of Al-Mahjar Poetry are:

First, although the rhythm is fixed, there is a lot of variation of rhyme and line length. Second, short meters are preferred to the longer ones. Third, there is

simplicity of diction. Images are not far-fetched. Spontaneity is dominant so that there is no place for artificiality. The focus is on the intrinsic human nature. Fourth, nostalgia is the central theme. Fifth, identification with nature and humanity at large is also a central theme. Sixth, the poets celebrate pain and suffering. Seventh, the poetry is full of binary opposition: day and night, east and west, beauty and ugliness and so on. Eighth, there is ambiguity. Some poems look like enigmas. (Al-Miwesh, p. 35)

The free form of verse was much different from the methods of traditional Arabic poetry that depended much on fixed rhythm and meters. An example of this free verse, short rhythm, and simple diction can be seen in the poems of Elia Abu Madi (1927a) who wrote only in Arabic and was considered the cream of the New York Pen League. In his poem “The Sea” he wonders about the intrinsic human temperament in relation to nature,

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 do not know  
Sea,  
You send the clouds  
Which water land and trees.  
We are you  
And said  
We are fruit.  
We drank of you  
And said

We drank the rain.  
 Is this true or false?  
 I don't know. (pp. 77-78)

Other times Abu Madi uses the same simplicity of diction and style to reflect on ambiguous themes that would appear to be an enigma that cannot be solved or explained, especially when it came to the issue of human existence. This is apparent in his poem "Riddles" from the title of which one can anticipate some kind of elusiveness,

Old or new  
 Is this existence?  
 Am I free  
 Or fettered?  
 Do I lead myself  
 Or am I led?  
 I wish I knew.  
 I do not.  
 I was nothing  
 Or was I something?  
 Is there an answer  
 To this riddle?  
 Or must it be forever  
 Unsolved?  
 I do not know;  
 And why I do not know  
 I know not. (Abu Madi, 1927b, pp. 74-75)

The words are clear in meaning, but when they are joined together in the poem, they reveal a true enigma. The poet is reflecting the notion that life, though it appears to be clear, there are still many things that go unanswered. He also admits that he himself does not know the answer to the questions he is proposing.

Poetry was an important literary tradition for the Arabs as mentioned earlier. Al-Mahjar literary figures kept this tradition alive for they knew its importance in reflecting and foregrounding the various aspects and conditions of life. They attempted to perfect it so it would live up to what they were experiencing in the diaspora. An example of the poets' recognition of the importance of poetry is perceptible in Gibran Khalil Gibran's (1962) work,

I grieve to hear the language of the spirits prattled by the tongues of the ignorant. It slays my soul to see the wine of the muses flow over the pens of the pretenders. [...]. Poetry, my dear friends, is a sacred incarnation of a smile. Poetry is a sigh that dries the tears. Poetry is a spirit who dwells in the soul, whose nourishment is the heart; whose wine is affection. Poetry that comes not in this form is a false messiah. (p. 21)

In these lines Gibran, author of the famous *The Prophet*, draws the boundaries between what is authentic and what is not? Gibran is offering his own transcendental view of poetry by pointing out the healing powers that a true poem can achieve. This approach goes back to an idea denoted to earlier regarding the Arabs' passion for poetry. The choice of words (sacred, spirit, soul, wine, and messiah are all related to religion, especially the Christian one) and the way he orders his sentences makes it sound as a sermon that preaches poetry and its effectiveness. Such efficiency would assist this literary tradition to accompany the immigrants' experiences.

One of the early themes that can be traced in Arab-American poetry is the issue of work. Some of these poets were Khalil Gibran, Ameen Rihani, Mikhail Naimy, and Elia Abu Madi, since that was one of their major topics, it was

reflected upon from various aspects. Many of the Arab immigrants began as peddlers roaming the metropolitan and rural areas. Unfortunately, this was not what they anticipated or come to expect because according to those the Protestant missionaries, who preached the United States to the Arabs, life in the United States meant financial stability, respect and equal opportunities. The reality of America did not live up to the missionaries' depicted canvas of the United States. Most of the immigrants were denied decent jobs and salaries due to the lack of training and ended up working in restaurants and other low-paid jobs. In his poem, which was written in Arabic, "I Dreamt I was a Donkey Boy Again" Ameen Rihani (1911), the first American of Arab heritage to devote himself to the writing of literature, dwells in a nostalgic way on his hometown and the pleasures he encountered during his workday there. He echoes his longing for the natural and primitive style of life that is in harmony with the surrounding environment: Nature. Although he was not one of those Arab-working peddlers in the U.S., he reflects on their suffering and how it is much more difficult to suffer in a strange land among strange people. For him daily labor back home carried with it the joys that his hometown offered him,

I dreamt I was a donkey boy again.

Out on the Sun-swept roads of Baalbek, I tramp behind my burro,  
trailing my  
mulayah.

At noon I pass by a garden redolent of mystic scents and tarry awhile.

Under an orange tree, on the soft green grass, I stretch my limbs.

The daisies, the anemones, and the cyclamens are around me pressing:

The anemone buds hold out to me their precious rubies; the daisies kiss  
me in

the eyes and the lips; and the cyclamens shake their powder in my hair.

(p. 5)

When reading these lines, one cannot help but notice, from the kind of imagery and metaphors that are used that there is a wide gap between his hometown and the place he is living in: New York. Although he puts forth the image of a peddler boy behind his small donkey, the work environment is much easing and carefree. This romantic and nostalgic picture of home is contrasted with the image of New York later on in the poem,

We do what we want in Nature's realm, go where we please;

No one's offended, no one ever wronged.

No sentinels hath Nature, no police.

But lo, a goblin taller than the tallest poplar, who carries me upon his neck to the park in the far New York. (p. 6)

The environmental difference in the workplace, between Baalbek and New York, is highly contrasted. While Baalbek is all natural, all free, New York is all stifling with watch dogs in every corner. The transfer from Baalbek to New York does not take place with the help of a fairy or genie, but rather on a shoulder of a goblin. This is merely to emphasize the horrific shift. Not only is the transfer oppressing, but it is also suffocating. Rihani later in the poem says, "the goblin placed his hand on my mouth, and I was dumb" (p. 7). Rihani is reflecting the apathetic nature of New York and how it has made him sterile on the creative level. The watchers [the police] are everywhere forcing limitations on individual rights. He also points out the humiliation that is visited upon him. A question that comes up here is by whom? Since the comparison is between New York and Baalbek, and in Baalbek no one is degraded, that automatically means the mortification is happening in New York by Americans. The poem ends in an appeal and desire for going back home and being a donkey boy again



rather than staying in New York. Rihani ends his poem by stating: “O, let me a burro-boy again; O, let me sleep among the cyclamens Of my own Land” (p. 6). Reading Rihani’s poem, one can label it as belonging to the pastoral tradition flavored with a pinch of romanticism due to the images he portrays. In fact, as a poet and author, he was both a romantic and a realist. On the one hand, he firmly rejected the negative aspects of society, and was a lover of both nature and simplicity. On the other hand, he did not talk of escapist solutions but rather of aims and objectives. In an essay entitled “Over Ancient Babylon,” for example, he talks about the coming of modern transport to the Arab world and how some ignorant people attempt to prevent their countries from development, Meanwhile, the doctors of the Mohammedan law, the ulema of Islam, will scan their sacred books to see if aught therein is mentioned about the railroad and the aeroplane. And if, after straining their theological faculties, they cannot find, expressed or implied, a divine sanction of these inventions, they will forthwith curse them from the pulpit. (Rihani, 1921, p. 100)

He attempted to criticize those who hindered the advancements that would make the lives of people easier, such as transportation. His criticism was that those individuals would dedicate time to research old texts in the aim of locating any support for their views to reject such advancements rather than encourage their societies to embrace change and progress. Bushrui (1999) described Rihani’s way of thought as “an intellectual and practical stance underpinned by a vision and an intuition that kept him in firm touch with the real needs of his people” (p. 7). As a critic,

He expressed the utmost contempt for linguistic scholasticism and for Romanticism in the form of woolly sentimentality. He reserved his most vitriolic attacks for the Arab neo-Classicists and was one of the first to call for socially committed poetry. A poet, he argued, should be fully involved with the

lives of those around him, as in the noble Bedouin tradition established long before the advent of Islam. (Bushrui, p. 4)

This standpoint of Rihani reveals that the Western cultures and their advocates like Rousseau, Levi-Strauss, Artaud, Macaulay, etc. whose, as Said (1983) phrased it, “thought is filled with discriminations such as these made between what is fitting for us and what is fitting for them, the former designated as inside, in place, common, belonging, in a word above, the latter, who are designated as outside, excluded, aberrant, inferior” (pp. 13-14), Rihani aimed at proving that non-western cultures were more than a Western perspective. The non-western cultures are not merely naïve, pristine, pure and innocent but rather active, alive and involved in the various sectors of life. An example of this occurs in 1921 when Rihani published two works which demonstrated his competence as an essayist and poet in English who can compete with any other western author or poet. One of them was *The Path of Vision*, which is a collection of essays illustrating basic differences, especially in philosophy and way of life, between the East and the West and between Christianity and Islam. Its central message is a sincere appeal for each to be willing to learn from the other, and for a harmonious relationship between the two. The book contains several references to Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman, and much of it is “imbued with their transcendentalist philosophy of the unity of existence, in particular man’s oneness with nature” (Bushrui, p. 8). Rihani asks:

What avails it to know that I am free, if I cannot realize this freedom in a definite, specific existence? But can it be realized wholly by a revolt only against a hierarchy or a state? It depends upon the nature and scope of the revolt. If we are concerned in breaking the fetters that are fastened upon our bodies and souls by external agencies only, we are doomed to failure. But if we become aware of the fetters, which we, in the sub-consciousness of centuries of submission, have fastened upon the spirit within us and strive to free ourselves

of them first, then we are certain to triumph. For freedom of the spirit is the cornerstone of all freedom. And this can be attained only by realizing its human limitations and recognizing its divine claim. It might be said too that freedom is to spirit what gravity is to matter. It is inherent in it and limited, yea, fettered by it. To know and recognize this truth is to rise to the highest form of freedom. (p. 44)

Rihani reveals his acknowledgement of the limitations of earthly existence. It also shows us “an intellect rooted in reality and inclining to practical solutions illumined by intuitive vision, rather than to escapism or sophistry like most of Rihani’s Arab contemporary verse-writers. One is reminded of Emerson in his *Journals*: ‘If you cannot be free, be as free as you can.’” (Bushuri, p. 12)

Rihani’s mind, although to an extent shaped by the influences of America, France and England, was blended with something of the Arabian imagination. Rihani began to dream of the glory of his past, his Arab cultural heritage, and to find in it sustenance for his life in the present. This return to the old glories of the past was also an attempt to warn the Arabs of the dangers threatening them and the ambitions of other nations in overtaking their lands. He urged them to unite and together promote a humanitarian spirit in reforming and modernizing their societies so that the Arab people would be able to play an important role in the modern world, just like they used to in the Golden Age of the Arabs that existed between the 7<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, without sacrificing the moral and spiritual heritage which has been their mainstay for centuries. For the materialism of America is in marked contrast to the images of his heritage that he experienced in his early life, as he relates in his *Introduction to Muluk al-’Arab (Arab Kings)*, published in 1924:

As a child, I knew little about the Arabs, and what little I knew was derived from what mothers tell their children about the Bedouin in an attempt to

frighten them into behaving properly ('Shush, the Bedouin is here'). Consequently, when I arrived in America, I had nothing but fear for those whose language I speak and whose blood runs in my veins. The only other culture I knew anything about was the French, and this only superficially, my information being derived from the French school I attended in Lebanon which taught me that France was the greatest nation in the world, the noblest, richest, and most advanced; the centre of civilization, beauty, and light; a peacock among nations, strutting majestically among the domestic fowls of the world's barnyard. After arriving in America, I became an admirer of the vitality of the American people, of the freedom they enjoyed in their thought, speech and deeds, but at the same time grew to fear their intense materialistic activity, their acquisitiveness. (p. 8)

The sense of estrangement and alienation that accompanied the Arab-American immigrants was further deepened due to the impact of the American metropolis. Most of them came from smaller cities, towns and villages only to face huge high-rise buildings and factories that were scattered across the United States. Even this internal split was reflected in the Arab-American literature. The culture shock is a result of the gap and inequality among nations, specifically those that are independent and economically blooming and those under occupation and economically deteriorating. In this case, the supremacy of the New World, America, manifests itself in the derogatory abuse of the new incoming immigrants. They were "face to face with results of modern civilization without having been through the process that produced it, and consequently, without having the traits and inhibitions that result thereof" (Hitti, p. 82). The rigorous and strange life that they had to endure, especially those who became peddlers, could not have been anticipated nor would have they been able to prepare for such abuse. Elias L., an Arab immigrant, recalls some of his sufferings while trying to make a living "Sundown each day became a signal for anxiety. Would he eat, if at all? Where would he sleep? A peddler's

eyes searched the countryside, as he trudged along, for haystacks, barns, empty schoolhouses, or any enclosure that could serve as shelter” (Naff, p. 184). The Arab immigrants were not as lucky in the cities either. As stated earlier, the Arab-American poet Rihani drew a very dull image of New York only to confirm and project the tedious city life caused by the impact of what the Arab-American immigrants encountered. In a narrative, Rihani (1955) reflected on this culture shock that the Arab-American went through:

In the New World, in the city of iron and heat, amidst the frightful bustle and deafening noise, where the tender are knifed and lofty yearnings are strangled; amidst the overpowering creative current, which enslaves the giants of labor; in the shadow of the skyscraper, which substitutes electricity for sun; in the city of iron and gold, where men live by the watch and the scale, the city which tallies and weighs everything; in New York City lived one who was poor at counting, who revered neither scales nor standards. (p. 8)

The Arab-American poets did not stop there; they began to rebuild and resurrect the dying hopes of those Arabs who immigrated to America. Their lives were full of agony and humiliation and poetry was one of the few ways to reach out to the Arab-American community and try to soothe their pains, anxieties and reflect a sense of community whose individuals - the Arab-Americans - are undergoing similar turmoil. Naimy (1914), one of the most acclaimed writers in the Arab-American world, in his poem “Close Your Eyes

and See,” is trying to draw a better picture for what is waiting ahead and give the immigrants some hope and support,

When clouds conceal your skies,  
Close your eyes;  
And see the stars beyond.  
If earth is wrapped with snow,  
Close your eyes;  
And see the flowers below.  
When sickness knows no ease,  
Close your eyes;  
And see the cure in the disease.  
And when the tomb gapes wide,  
Close your eyes;  
And see the cradle there inside. (p. 62)

This poetic tradition that most Arab-American poets try to preserve is unique. One cannot help but acknowledge the philosophic depth of such simple metaphors that can be appreciated by either intellectuals or illiterate people. This poetry was written for all regardless of their educational and economic status. It was aimed at creating a sense of belonging through suffering. It was meant to touch upon the issues of hopelessness, sickness and death in a strange country among strange people that share no sympathy for foreigners. This poetry goes out to the Arab-Americans who many times found themselves homeless, foodless, penniless. It goes out to those who had no “shelter and had to cuddle next to a pig in the barn for warmth” (Naff, p. 184), and to those who had to cramp themselves by the dozens, families and singles, into worn-down rooms devoid of electricity, no window panes, heating, beds, bathrooms, or running water (Naff, p. 207). Poems and poets like Naimy and others were what

kept them going and clinging on to their dignity as human beings striving for survival and a better life.

The Arab-Americans endeavored to assert themselves as ordinary human beings just like every other American. They wanted to demonstrate that they belonged to the human race and were not outsiders. The Arab-Americans fought in World War I in the American army; many were killed and many others returned to the U.S. In their writings, they tried to mirror the horror of war and the tragedy it brings onto the human race. Naimy (1919), in his poem “My Brother,” like many other American poets who articulated antiwar sentiments, expressed his anger, towards the attitudes of supporters of the war:

Brother, if on the heels of war Western man  
celebrates his deeds,  
Consecrates the memory of the fallen  
and builds monuments for heroes,  
Do not yourself sing for the victors nor rejoice  
over those trampled by victorious wheels;  
Rather kneel as I do, wounded, for the end of our dead.  
The world breathes our stench, as it did that of the dead  
Bring the spade and follow me—dig another trench  
for those still alive. (p. 59)

This poem shows Naimy’s indictment of war. Why would he support it? It was one of the reasons he left his region in the first place. Like many other human beings who wanted to live in peace, he wanted stability. The reason he went to war was because it was his duty as an American to join the army when he was called upon. He did not want to be looked upon as an alien that had no patriotism or commitment to his country America. That was one way to become American: in order to live as an American, one had to be prepared to die for America. American idealism and patriotism were reflected in a different way by

another Arab-American poet when he wrote a hymn for the American flag. Abu Madi (n.d.) wrote; “On its stripes escort the stars/ True shelter is under it/ Long live America, the best sanctuary/ From generation to generation!” (p. 67).

The Arab-Americans have tried to appropriate and integrate with the American mainstream. However, upon arrival to the United States, they encountered a different environment than of that advocated to them by the Protestant missionaries. The physical description of the cities and town was precise, large cities, huge building, congested metropolitans, electricity, railroads, but the promise of decent well-paid jobs and respect were absent from the life of discrimination they encountered. Life in the United States was difficult and humiliating at times. The immigrants lived in poor colonies with inadequate accommodations. These dire conditions did not go unnoticed.

The Arab-American poets embarked on a mission of recording these asperities in their poems and at times attempted to offer some form of encouragement to the early Arab-Americans. Moreover, the Arab-American literary figures addressed the development of the early Arab-American identity from being Arab to becoming American. They explored the various achievements and complexities that accompanied this ethnicity and prevented it from a prompt and complete assimilation as American.



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