



Arab American Novel: Development and Issues

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Abstract

The novel in the Arab-American literature is absolutely considered a modern writing in its existence and styles except The Book of Khalid (1911) which was written in the first decade of the twentieth century. It becomes the main genre in the body of Arab-American literature and the large numbers of Arab-American novels have been published as a result of the considerable efforts made after the eighties of 20th century. Arab-American novels generally tackle issues such as the problem of identity, anti-Arab racism, marginalization, immigration and situations of refugees, nostalgia, and exile. They also foreground social problems Arab-American communities face as heterogeneity, generational differences, oppression, stereotype, social injustice and anti-assimilationist discourses. Moreover, the Arab-American novels try to create reconciliation between the Western and oriented cultures and reconciliation between the culture and values of the West and the East, the displacement of Palestinians, war and poverty in the Middle East, and so forth. This paper aims at providing an overview of the development of Arab-American novel as well as exploring the most common issues and themes discussed by this kind of genre in the Arab-American literature. It also tries to investigate in detail the concept of identity as a debatable issue in the contemporary Arab-American literature.

Key words: Arab-American Novel; Identity; Reconciliation; Immigration; Cultural perplexity

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INTRODUCTION

The narrative heritage of Arabs is absolutely rich, old and diverse. Arabs used to narrate their stories, heroism and experiences through long poems and effective rhetoric. It has been known different types of narratives in the Arabic literature such as ‘Qissa’ (Story), Uqsoosa (Short Story), Al-Maqama (Poetic Story), ‘Riwaaya’ (Narrative) ‘Hikaaya’ (Tale), Plays, Legends, Myths, Biography, Anecdote, etc. Therefore, the beginning of the Arab-American novel is due to the direct influence of the modern Western novel as well as after the fruitful connection of Arab immigrants with the other ethnicity groups in America. It was also influenced by the newly written novels of Arab at the end of 19th and the beginning of 20th centuries. It is a well-known fact that the novels written in Arabic at that time were also influenced by the Western literature through the mainstream of translation movement and educational experiences of Arabs who studied in America and Europe as Taha Hussein, Tawfiq al-Hakim, Mohammed Hussein Haikal, Naguib Mahfouz, etc. At the end of the twentieth century, the Arab-American novel was emerged and the novels written by Diana Abu Jaber have been considered the real beginning of Arab-American novel. The political, social and cultural conditions of Arabs in America as well as the immigration have created a new style of narrative. They have gone beyond the traditional narrative forms and began writing novel, memoirs, biographies, and stories with a beautiful structure and style. They have presented different points of view with great experiences of Arabs in general and Arab-Americans in particular.

1. WHY DID ARAB-AMERICANS START WRITING NOVELS?

Orfalea (2006) in his essay “The Arab American Novel” refers that one reason for writing novels by Arab-

Americans is “Because humanness has been so lacking in American novels that treat Arabs in English [...]. The Arab American novelist has indeed a mission beyond the normal one of making moving art. The Arab American novelist is giving birth to images of humanness” (p.117). Therefore, Arabs cannot live away from the essential issues that exist in their homelands which can be easily noticed through themes they are writing about. Salaita (2011) also refers to some important issues Arab-American fiction deals with:

Some themes appear to be specific to Arab American fiction, though, based on many of its authors’ common experiences: the Israel-Palestine conflict; the Lebanese Civil War of 1975–90; the representation and practice of Islam in the United States; and Islamophobia; the politics and histories of the Arab world; social issues such as gender and national identity in Arab cultures; and the various identities that come with being Arab American. (“*Modern Arab American Fiction*” PP. 7-8)

Therefore, the Arab-American novel has been taking great attention in the Arab writings from early-stage up to the recent days. Arab-American novelists have found writing a novel as the best means to clearly and simply reflect the thinking pattern, political, social and cultural interest of the Arabic character. The task and mission of the Arab-American novelist seem clear. They believe that there is an urgent need for writing novels to reflect the realities of Arabs in America. One of their duties is to attempt to clarify the negative image of Arabs in the mind of Westerner which is depicted by the Anti-Arab media. Majaj (1999), in her study “New directions: Arab American writing at century’s end” lists the rationales for the need of this literary genre, which acts as a correction of the erroneous understanding of the Arabs reality in Western discourse. She writes:

We need to write texts—especially novels—that will translate political realities into human terms, and that will create a space for empathy of the part of readers who might otherwise remain indifferent. Given the depth of ignorance and misinformation about the Arab world, we are particularly in need of prose—of writing that is capacious enough in form to convey fact as well as emotion. We need historically-grounded novels that will narrate Arab realities to American readers without sacrificing literary quality to didacticism, that will tell a compelling but also informative story. But in taking on such projects, we need to make sure that we’re not writing tracts, but are writing literature. (p.76)

The diversity of styles, issues and points of view in the Arab-American novels is due to the trans-genetic combination of different origins of the Arab-American novelists. In this regard, some models of this genetic mixture and diversity are represented by several Arab-American women novelists such as Diana Abu-Jaber’s novels, who was raised in upstate New York to a Jordanian father and an American mother, Laila Lalami was born not too long ago in Morocco and educated in the United States, Naomi Shihab Nye was born to a Palestinian Muslim father and an American mother and brought up

in San Antonio, the poet-memoirist Elmaz Abinader, a Palestinian-American novelist born in Pennsylvania (Orfaea, 2006, p.120).

The study argues that Arab-American novel has come out as a result of the interaction between multicultural environments in the new country with the culture of Arabs. Arab-American novelists aim to reflect their vision about several issues and convey their messages to the Western readers and Arabs as well. To investigate the issues and themes Arab-American novel tackles, the study attempts to shed light on different examples of Arab-American novels. It tries to give more attention to the concept of identity as a debatable issue in the Arab-American writings as well as giving a glance at other issues and themes of the modern novels written by Arab-American novelists.

2. IDENTITY: AN ISSUE IN ARAB AMERICAN NOVEL

The problem of identity becomes a salient phenomenon in most of Arab-American writings. It occupies wider attention in literature in general and in the novels in particular. In literature, for instance, Arab-American writers play an important role in highlighting the problem of identity and present it as a debatable issue socially and politically. Through their literary texts they attempt to show how the identity of Arab-Americans is formed, reconstructed, negotiated and performed inside and outside homeland. And the identity crisis happens as a result of lack of an individual’s ability to adapt to the social milieu where someone lives; it is because of the collision of someone’s needs, desires, and self-beliefs with what are in the community. In *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* Mercer (2013) observes that “identity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed; coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty” (p.43). It is true that the diverse backgrounds of Arab-Americans play an important role in the formation of their identities such as religion, social circumstances, history, language, cultural differences, and imperialist effects.

In *Arabian Jazz* (1993), for instant, Diana Abu Jaber deals with the Arab-American issues that appear as a result of being in a new cultural milieu. She focuses on the second generation’s experiences of the Arab-Americans, reflects the reality of their culture and highlights the matter of identity crisis among them. The novel also attempts to provide readers through its fictional story how Arab-Americans understand themselves and explains how they realize their identity in Western society. The characters in *Arabian Jazz*, for instance, are Arabs who live in America, but they are confused which identity should they adapt either the American identity or the Arab

identity. The characters in the novel are torn between two identities, two cultures, and two worlds. Abu Jaber's novel has embodied the reality of Arab-Americans in the American society. Matussem and Fatima migrated to America and are still extremely pleased with their identity and culture. Unlike their father, Matussem, Jemorah and Melvina struggle with their hybrid identities which are mixed with American values and Arab values. Fatima works hard to make Jemorah and Melvina follow the customs and traditions of their Arab background, rather than the Western culture and the social principles of their deceased mother. This situation has created a conflict between Jemorah and her aunt, Fatima. Jemorah and Melvina anxiously look for their identity in two different cultures; the Western culture they grow up in and the homeland culture they have been asked to preserve. They strive for their identity under the unavoidable control of their aunt, Fatima. In their early years of childhood, they have been grown up by two different cultures and this upbringing creates for them dual belonging and identity. Jemorah and Melvina from the second generation in the story are half Arab and half Irish American. Their hybrid identity is formed 'in-betweenness' as Bhabha puts it. The concept that the intercultural space where hybrid identity is formed is a space of in-betweenness and liminality or 'the third space of enunciation' (Bhabha, 1994, pp.8-9-54).

Based on the above, it is clear that Melvina and Jemorah have troubles with their identities. They are confused about their position in Western culture when they compare this condition to the Middle Eastern culture. This ambiguous situation about their identity always raises the question of whether they are Arabs or Americans. They sometimes do not have a particular affinity for the Arab culture but, on the other hand, the American friends do not see them as truly Americans. In the same way, their relatives and friends in Jordan consider them Americans. When Matussem and Nora have been in Amman, aunts in Jordan call Melvina "Amerkani," [meaning "American" in Arabic] (p.78).

In the novel, Jemorah is presented as confused, vague, and stray. As half Arab, she is ambivalent about her identity and role in American society. Jemorah proclaims her ambiguous identity: "I'm tired of fighting it out here. I don't have much idea of what it is to be Arab, but that's what the family is always saying we are. I want to know what part of me is Arab. I haven't figured what part is our mother, either. It's like she abandoned us, left us alone to work it all out" (pp.307-8). It is possible to argue that Abu Jaber's hyphenated identity as half-American and half-Arab might have influenced her to discuss such topics in most of her fictions. The ambiguity in understanding her identity is reflected in her writings as well as in the voices of her characters in the novels. In her memoir, *The Language of Baklava*, she exposes this ambiguous

situation when she always asks herself, "Who am I?" [...] "I am America, Israel, England! What am I doing?" (p.190). The novelist presents the Arab-American citizen carrying two identities, Arabic identity and American identity. He or she is an Arab at home and an American in the street. (*The Language*, 2005, p.5).

In *The Cairo House* (2000), Samia Serageldin focuses also on the problem of identity of Arab-Americans. Gigi, the protagonist in novel, has a dual identity. She is in trouble because she is still carrying Egyptian identity and at the same time searching for her identity in the Western society. In the novel, Gigi seems to be torn between being Egyptian and American. She has been split between two identities, two cultures and two societies. She neither becomes a complete American citizen nor does she keep a full Arabic identity. She finds herself suffering from the problem of belonging and the crisis of identity. The novelist presents a struggle of an Arab-American woman through the protagonist, Gigi, who shows an ever-present awareness of her dual identity. The novelist knows herself very well as an Arab-American who consciously and unconsciously lives in a hyphenated place. Thus, she is concerned with the best possible ways to rescue the Arab-American personality.

The events of the novel positively contribute to the arguments which help expose, analyze, criticize, and redefine the identity inherent in Serageldin's works. They help accept the valuable needs for the mastery of the novelist's own identity. The events in the novel might reflect the novelist's point of view. In the novel, Gigi searches for her real identity and the homeland she belongs to. She asserts that the purpose of her return to Egypt is "to find out if it is still mine [...]. To discover where I belong" (p.4). This need for identity is a familiar feeling brought to all Arab immigrants who have left their homeland despite the deep love towards home. The question of identity is repeating itself throughout the events of the novel. When the white-haired couples ask Gigi where she was from, she tries not to reveal her real identity and is confused about what to say whether she is Egyptian or American. For Gigi, it seems a challenging question to be answered. The dual identity creates in her personality, two characters, two minds, and two attitudes. She is unable to reveal which identity she should adopt. "At some point they ask me where I am from, and I answer, truthfully, that I live in New Hampshire. It is not evasiveness, nor even the instinct to resist being pigeon-holed. It is only that any answer I give will be just as incomplete and misleading, so this is as good- or bad- as any other" (p.2). This complicated situation puts Gigi's identity in an awkward position. She does not know how to deal with things. She is hesitant when and where from she has to begin her life story; to go back to the past and adopts the previous identity of childhood, or to accept the new life and new identity, as an Arab-American.

Luc is also another example of characters who suffers from an identity crisis. He drops his identity to marry Gigi. In Islamic law, it is not allowed to non-Muslim man to marry a Muslim woman; therefore, Luc converts to Islam and adopts a new identity in order to marry Gigi. He changes his name from Luc to Abdullrahman, a Muslim name. "You mean the problem of religion? I'll become a Muslim on paper, if that's what it takes. [...] I couldn't ask you to do that!" (p.133). Although Gigi is an Arab-American woman, she does not really know what she is. She cannot see herself as pure Arab or pure American and she is torn between two identities, two cultures and two worlds.

Susan Abulhawa, the Arab-American novelist, discusses the same issue in her two novels *Mornings in Jenin* (2010) and *The Blue Between Sky and Water* (2015). The characters in the novels suffer from identity crisis as Amal, Ismail and Nora. In *Mornings in Jenin*, Ismael is the son of Arab parents but he grew up in a Jewish family. Moshe, the Jewish soldier, steals Ismael and changes his name to David. Jolanta, the wife of Moshe brings him up with a fake identity, and culture. This situation leads to the loss of the real culture and identity of Ismael. He becomes a Jewish boy and has no hesitance to beat and torture his brother, Yousef. The novelist brings this event to indicate that David is engaged in the process of the conflict with the Palestinians beyond limits. He insolently insults Yousef and the reason is that Yousef is Palestinian. He was raised on the hatred of Arabs in general and Palestinians in particular. Yet, he does not know about his origin, but he eventually will know his real name and his real parents.

David is placed in a false place, with a fake identity and false paternity. Jolanta neither is his real mother nor is Moshe, his father. His new identity varies from the culture and identity of his real family. They change his real identity. The novelist guides David finally to know his real name and identity. He finally discovers that he is not a Jewish, but an Arab boy who was stolen as child from an Arab family. He comes to know the reality which is hidden by Moshe and Jolanta for three decades. He becomes in crisis because he does not know whether he is an Arab, or a Zionist. Nora in *The Blue between Sky and Water* is an Arab girl who grew up in the West. She grew up in a Western environment of non-parents with a different culture. She knows that her family lives in Palestine. She travels to Gaza and is shocked because of the reactions of Nazmiyeh towards her Western behavior as an American girl. She practices life according to the environment in which she grew up. The Western environment is completely different to the one in homeland. The conflict between the behavior of Nora and the reactions of Nazmiyeh reflects the conflict between her real identity and the supposed identity her family wants. Nora carries two identities and two cultures; the Palestinian identity and the American identity. This hybrid identity leads to an internal conflict in her character

because she does not know which identity satisfies the new society, i.e. whether to be an American or an Arab girl.

In the *West of the Jordan* (2003), Laila Halaby investigates the problem of identity and the mixture of ethnicity. The novelist reveals the anxiety of cultural conflicts and historical and economic situation of the narrators. She also focuses on sociopolitical issues including racism, xenophobia, human rights, civil liberties, and the negative effects of the September 11 attacks on American society. The protagonists in the novel are Arab-American who have emigrated from Jordan. Salwa and Jassim are born in the United States and raised in Jordan to Palestinian Muslim parents. They suffer from the duality of their identity. They try to connect themselves to the existence of Palestine as an important source of their identity and culture.

3. RECONCILIATION BETWEEN CULTURES AND OTHER ISSUES

Arab-American novels try to create reconciliation between the Western and oriented cultures and reconciliation between the culture and values of the West and the East. They also foreground social problems Arabs face such as the tragedy of war, danger of terrorism, violence against woman, immigration, cultural tension, oppression, marginalization, stereotype, social injustice, marginalization, refugees, nostalgia, and homeland. *The Book of Khalid* (1911), a novel written by Amin Rihani, is considered the first Arab-American novel not only about an Arab-American, but an Arab immigrant's misadventures in turn-of-the-century New York. It was for fifty years the only novel in English written by an Arab American in the United States (Orfalea, p.122). It is a story about two young Arab immigrants who migrated from Syria to New York and worked as peddlers of some minor products in the streets of the city. The novelist through his protagonist, Khalid, called to the reconciliation between the Western culture and the Eastern one and taking advantage of Western civilization in the Arab world. Khalid thinks about the importance of the relationship between the United States and the Arabs in establishing security in the world. The novel presents Khalid like all Arab immigrants to America who finds it difficult to move from Arabic culture to the American's. Lebanese looked at him as American and he failed to prove to them that he is still a Lebanese. He suffers from the conflict and crisis in his identity and cannot understand whether to be an Arab or an American.

The Arab-American novel also discusses the violence against woman. Mikhail Naimy in the *Memoirs of a Vagrant Soul* (1952) narrates the story of Shakib, a Syrian emigrant who falls in love with the young and beautiful girl, Najla. He is engaged to be married to her, their

families are so glad to be best couples, unfortunately, on their wedding day, Shakib slays his bride in a small hotel room and runs away leaving behind him only a slip of paper on which he has written: "I slew my love with my hand, for it was more than my body could feed and less than my soul hungered for" (p.138).

The danger of terrorism is explored in Samuel Hazo's *The Very Fall of the Sun* (1978). The novel narrates a story of an American couple who were kidnapped by a terrorist leader during their holidays in an unknown tropical area in the country. The novel also criticizes the American foreign policy abroad particularly in the Middle East. Although it has no Arab-American characters, it tries to draw a direct connection with the Middle East and explores the common problem faced by the whole world. The Arab-American novel also exposes the bitter sequences of war in the Middle East. In *Sitt Marie Rose* (1978), Etel Adnan, a Lebanese-American poet, and novelist, criticizes the civil war in Lebanon which is based on the violent behavior directed by ideology. The novelist exposes the main reasons for war in Lebanon which is due to political, religious and sectarian division. She narrates a story of a Christian woman teacher called Marie Rose during the civil war in Lebanon. While Marie was conducting her duty in the classroom, a group of Militiamen kidnapped her in front of her students. In the novel, the leader of the group, Mounir, and Marie know each other and have a romantic relationship. Mounir is hesitant to marry her because he thinks she is wrong in political and national beliefs.

The social issues and family problems are highlighted in Mona Simpson's *The Lost Father* (1993). The novel tells the story of Mayan, an Arab-American girl. Mayan searches for her Egyptian father who abandoned her mother twenty years earlier. She spends a lot of money in her study but she still unsatisfied in her life. She has not seen her Egyptian father since she was a young child. She feels as if something had been taken from her body. She waits for her father to return and legalizes her existence. She goes to Egypt, where she meets her grandmother who deeply loves her. Her father is a professor, but he also becomes a gigolo, and a gambler. Finally, Mayan finds her father and is shocked at his being merely a man. In the *Tower of Dreams* (1995), Kathryn K. Abdul-Baki narrates a story of two migrant friends one is an Arab-American girl who lives in New York and the other is a Muslim girl has come from Lebanon. The novel is set in Kuwait between the 1950s and 1960s. The novelist tells the story of both girls since the day they have first met in the grade through their high school graduation. The novelist also depicts the real life of families in Kuwait whose situation has been changed into prosperous life after the discovery of oil.

The tragedy of civil war in Lebanon is also main issue in the Arab-American novel. Rabih Alameddine, a Lebanese-American preminent novelist, in *Koolaid's*:

The Art of War (1998) discusses the tragic effects of war in Lebanon. He focuses on the Lebanese civil war, diseases caused by the war, starvation, sex, epidemic, and difficulties of life during the war in Lebanon. The novel narrates stories of three main characters Samir, Mark, and Mohammed. The main aim of the novel is to depict the meaninglessness of life during the war. The American academic and professor of modern Arabic literature, Miriam Cooke, exposes the experiences of three generations of Arab-Americans through her only novel *Hayati, My Life* (2000). The novel narrates stories of three Palestinian women and their families. It exposes the suffering and trauma of Palestinians after the Nakba 1948 till present days. The novel portrays the personal struggle of Samya, Maryam and Assia in explaining the tragedy of war in the Middle East. Samya hosts her daughter, Assia, and her husband, Basil, after the massacre of Deir Yassin. With the help of her mother and husband, Assia struggles to cover her expenses by working in a day-care center. She also takes care of her two daughters, Maryam and Afaf during her work.

The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf (2006) is a novel written by Mohja Kahf. It deals with the problem of cultural perplexity among Arab-American community in a secular society. The novel focuses on the life of Khadra Shamy, an Arab-American girl born to Syrian immigrant parents. Khadra Shamy returns to the community in which she grew up in a small town called Simonsville. Her family lives in an Islamic environment related to Dawah Center, an Islamic education society. Khadra's memory goes back to both sad and happy childhood memories with her close African American friends. She remembers their collective treatments with local racists and xenophobes. The novelist criticizes the racist treatment against Arabs in the American society which might happen because of the attack of September-11.

Angela Tehaan Leone in *Swimming toward the Light* (2007) portrays a Lebanese immigrant family in America in the 1950s. The novelist exposes the social injustice and male-dominated culture against female in the Arabian family. In the novel, three elder sons are given the rights to leave home, whereas the two youngest daughters are kept at home to suffer from the parents' domination and oppression. The novel mainly focuses on a daughter in the family, Madge, who has a romantic relationship with a man called Doug and they quickly get married. She leaves school behind and forgets her dream to be an artist. Madge only believes in eternal romance and love. After having kids with Doug, she faces so many problems as well as born in United State another woman comes in Doug's life.

In *A Map of Home* (2008), Randa Jarrar narrates the story of Nidali Ammar; a young girl born in America to an Egyptian mother and a Palestinian father. She has spent her childhood in flux between Kuwait, Palestine, Egypt, and Texas. Nidali grows up in Kuwait before the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and then she moves from

Kuwait to Egypt and eventually fleeing to the US to live in Texas. Moreover, *Naomi Shihab Nye* is an Arab-American poet and novelist. She, in *Turtle of Oman* (2014), narrates a story of an Omani family who is going to America to study. The novelist explores the themes of love of homeland, family, nature, and immigration. Aref, a young boy in the family, is annoyed about leaving Oman and does not want to move to America. Few days before they move, he visits all his favorite places with his grandfather, Sidi. The novel is a creative work that effectively illustrates differences in cultures and places between Oman and America. It exposes the usual feelings of homesickness and the anxiety of starting a new life in a different place.

CONCLUSION

The study has attempted to explore the development and themes of Arab-American novel as an important genre in the Arab-American literature. The study has reached the fact that Arab-American novelists have played great prominent efforts in the development of Arab-American novel, mainly in the contemporary era. They have impressively struggled to take an advanced place in the body of Arab-American writings which have received the attention of the West and the Arab readers alike and also got a significant consideration of researchers and scholars. It is clear that Arab-American novelists have used their literary works to resist anti-Arab racism, marginalization, racism, oppression, stereotype, social injustice, displacement, war and poverty. They have positively connected themselves with fellow Arab-American writers, natives, and newcomers. They have tried to negotiate their hyphenated identities and defied stereotypes and misconceptions against them. The study finds that the large numbers of Arab-American novels have been published as a result of the considerable efforts made after the eighties of the last century. And it is clear that Arab-American women novelists are mainly the largest contributors in writing novels and this fact refers to the crucial roles they have done. Furthermore, the present study has found that Arab-American novel is absolutely a modern writing in its existence, styles and most of Arab-American novels written by women writers.

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