



**A STUDY ON THE IMPACTS OF DIASPPORA AND TRANSNATIONALISM IN  
ARAB-AMERICAN WOMAN POETRY**

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**Abstract**

*Poetry tries to make a connection between the absence and the losses that I feel in my person, and make the connection to the body feeling detached or feeling displaced, and the reality of land and shelter and the idea of the continuity of citizenship and the idea of ancestry.*

*SuheirHammad.*

*Since centuries, poetry has been a reliable means for expressing ideas, feelings, and ways of life in metrical composition for both men and women. In the other hand, Women find poetry a safe shelter to overflow their emotions and experiences in artistic mold to put some light to their own hardships of life. This paper examines the literary representations of feminist of the Middle East struggles in the western countries particularly in United States. It aims to explore the simultaneous articulation of pivotal concerns in contemporary English poetry written by Arab women.*

*One of the primary goals of this paper is to explore the major effects of diaspora and mixed identity in the contemporary Arab-American feminist poetry and how it contributes in the poetic improvements in American poetry and in the Arab-American women's status. Most, if not all, of Arab-American women poets have gone back to their culture of origin and tried to understand it, be part of it, nourish it and expand it into their own lives and beings, while remaining in an American context or background. The concern of Arab-American women poets is to find a place in their bicultural upbringing, and their search for an Arab identity. Such struggle for an Arab identity has played a significant role in their poetry. Most of Arab-American women poets were born in the United States, of Arab descent, or born in the Arab world, and immigrated to the United States. It is estimated that about ninety percent of Arab-Americans originate from Levant. The majority of these women cannot speak Arabic; some have never been attached to the Middle East. Many might wonder how these poets claim to be Arab without speaking Arabic. Yet culture is not only language. Also not all Arabs are Muslims, and yet shared sociopolitical, historical, and economic experiences. This paper is to concern closely to Arab-American women poetry, its themes, and poetic identity as well as to examine the doubleness of Arab-American feminist poets and how it reflects in their poetic writings.*

*Arab-American women poets have succeeded to affirm their ethnicity, their Arab and American identities, their national and religious identities through their literary works. Apart from the conflicts and complexities often attached to multiple identities and contexts; apart from politics, socio-cultural dynamics and turmoil; apart from crossing the boundaries of their identity and demonstrating alliances and parallelism with other ethnic groups; apart from demonstrating experiences of discrimination and marginalization, Arab-American women poets are also engaging in self-criticism and brining to surface subjects that are considered taboo in Arab-American society. Hence, the study attempts to examine their poetry as a tool for resistance, and as self-definition, as well as a space for conciliating the complexities of their hyphenated identities.*

**Key words:** diaspora; hyphenated identities; self-definition; absence; loss; contemporary poetry; hybridity.



## **Introduction**

In the last decades of the twentieth century, Arab-American women's writing has emerged as a method for self-representation that aims to claim agency whilst challenging mainstream public and official discourses. Through varied practices of writing, Arab-American women have fought, firstly to negate the persistent apprehension of them as outsiders that has often stigmatized their reception, and, secondly, to posit themselves as part of the ethnic tissue in the United States.

The immigration process to USA eventually can be divided into three phases: first one was from 1880 to 1924 when Arab-Christians from Syria, Lebanon and Palestine were migrated by Ottoman rules in a movement of escape from massacre at that time happened by Ottoman kingdom. The second phase of immigration happened after World War II. The third major stage began in 1967 till the present. Here, Arabs had begun to grapple with the language and culture of the host country. By the time, Arab-Americans became more concerned to the process of Americanization that has probably racial definitions for the American identity, and this offered more social exclusion for Arabs. On the other hand, there was what was called Naturalization Act of 1790 which had granted the right of citizenship to the pure white person as it was termed 'free white persons'. Thus Arab-Americans found themselves living under enormous pressures to assimilate the U.S. context. At the same time Arab identity was a matter of great importance to Arab immigrants. How to maintain Arab identity in the American-born generation was the major task of those people in American society.

However, the laws of naturalization were challenged and sometimes refused as it was based on if whether citizens qualified as white or not. Such laws not only determined the destiny of immigrants but also set the precedents for the exclusion of entire ethnical group. However, those cases, links and clashes between whiteness, non-whiteness, Christian, non-Christian, American identity, non-American identity, European, non-European shaped Arab-American experience and literature directly and indirectly.

Apparently, the position of Arabs in America today is described as relatively colonized, and imbibing so many of the biases and distortion around them, which has rendered their heritage ambiguous to them. Therefore, the mission of Arab-American writers in the twenty-first century is to seek out the overlooked minor detail of their heritage, often ignored by politics, and to help them 'rebuild a fragmented, uncertain identity' (Aziz, xiii). Arab-American women have perceived literature and poetry in direct continuity with Arab-American politics, for coupling politics with literature enhances its capacity for reaching a broader audience.

In searching of a place in mainstream of American literary circles, Arab-American women artists tried to increase sales and acceptance by creating for themselves the image of charismatic genius and to make themselves and their writings as a compromise between the spiritual East and the rational West, in other words, between mystical and dynamic. The irony of Arab-American literature is that it did not attain any recognition until the world woke up



one day to the horror of the renowned 9/11 and asked itself who those 'Arabs' really were. Also more attention was paid for those people who are living on the piece of land of the US, who called themselves Arab-American. The additional irony is that Anglophone Arab-American writers are perhaps not paradigmatic Arabs, themselves being the result of cultural espousal, hybridity, and diasporic experience. It simply happened because their works came to the light in recent years, as they seemed to meet the needs of a readership eager to learn about Arab culture in a language that was the lingua franca of the modern age.

### **The Diaspora and Transnationalism in Arab-American Women Poetry**

Arab-American women poets concerned themselves with the themes of psychological and social exclusion that they experienced greatly in their host community. The double-consciousness and ethnicity were reflected obviously in their writings, and the quest for self-representation clearly anticipates the postmodern and postcolonial elements in their texts. For example, Naomi Shihab collections poems *Fuel* (1998) range over a variety of subjects, scenes and settings. In these poems there is an attempt at connection between opposing or distant forces. These crafted connections offer bridges on which readers might find their own stable footing, enabling them to peek over the railings at the lush scenery. Nye's observations of everyday life and strife never quite acquire collective force, yet they convey a delicate sense of moral concern and a necessary sense of urgency.

Moreover, politics was major theme that featured in women poets' poems. The political events in the Middle East were the prominent concern for Arab-Americans though they were spatial separated from their countries of origins. They wished to communicate their ideas on the serious political issues that were troubling their countries in the Middle East to help in enlightening people there with ideas for better future.

The literary landscape of Arab-American women poets, particularly in the latter half of the twentieth century, is one of abundance, diversity and contrasts, manifesting a richness of voices and imagination, and reflecting important changes taking place in the both America and Arab world culturally, socially, politically, and artistically. Most of Arab-American women poets have gone back to their culture of origin and tried to understand it, be part of it, nourish it and expand it. They experience an on-going negotiation of self as they explore their many experiences, visions, and heritages, and bring wholeness to their multiplicity. They affirm their ethnicity, their Arab and American identities, their national and religious identities. The struggle of gender, with the fight against in the portrayal of women's discrimination and segregation professionally, educationally and socially in American community emphasized the necessary of social reform in order for Arab society to expand, grow and evolve.

Arab-American women poets started to realize the difficulty of their situation in the US alienation, especially after the attacks of September 11, 2001. They were caught in a plight which burdened them with much pressure. Yet they have faced the new dilemma of the Arabs in the American society courageously. They have deal with the increasing Diasporic



consciousness of theirs successfully creating a new frame of their position inside and outside the society of the host-country.

Women poets have practiced some technics in their poetry to obtain their goals of their fighting for their rights in USA: they discuss the possibilities of the balancing between the American 'Self' and the Arab 'Other'; they sympathize with American pain and suffering because of the terrifying 9/11 event; they condemn terrorism and violence; they criticize the American foreign policy that interferes other countries affairs; they attack the American collective view of terrorism and evil imposed on all Arab-Americans; they adopt Islam as a religion and a way of life .

Arab-American women poets had been marginalized for many years. However, they decided to fight for their rights and they succeeded to obtain their own goals by playing a great role in American literature. The pressures they have suffered in their journey of fighting have been reflected in their poetry which produced a kind of diasporic, alienation and Othering process consciousness. The awareness of being alienated in the American society, due to of being Muslim woman of Arabic origin has created particular kind of themes in their poetry. Thus, after achieving many goals, to some extent, Arab-American women writers become no longer marginalized. They have undertaken very strong battle to gain their recognizable achievements in American literary world for long time.

In 1990s, feminism of Arab-American has seen more awareness. There was a big emphasis of Arab-American women to their Arab identity and fight against the misrepresentation of Arab women and their culture through anti-war activism in the First Gulf War. In "A Woman's Place is in the Struggle", an essay by Nada Elia, she expresses:

A Personal Viewpoint on Feminism, Pacifism, and the Gulf War," for instance, criticizes the imperialist nature of the United States' military and political involvement in the affairs of the Arab World: In 1991, I "fought" Desert Storm as a member of a peace coalition . . . I joined all the marches and political protests I could. Until then, my complex background allowed me not to feel personally involved because I could always claim to be someone else: Palestinian when the Lebanese were being criticized, a resident of West Beirut when the East Beirutis were described as bloodthirsty savages, Christian when the Muslims were called ruthless murderers. But I avoided all of that during the Gulf War. I was appalled at the arrogance of the United States appointing itself World Cop and couching everything in the hypocritical. "We're doing this for democracy." Centuries earlier, colonial England had said it was acting in the name of Christian charity by spreading civilization across the world. (114-15)

Situating Arab women against a white context is significant. Although Arab Americans have long been categorized by the U.S. racial census as "White," most of them have never accepted this racial identification. Instead, they closely identify with non-white groups and perceive of themselves as a community of color, subject to racial discrimination, including anti-Arab stereotypes. Arab American feminists, in particular, have joined women of color in the United States in order to share with them the struggle against forms of racism and



sexism. Azizah Al-Hibri views the conflict between American mainstream feminism and Arab American feminism as having racial roots. She critiques the tendency of American feminists to hold 'an Orientalist view of Islam, and act on that view,' which makes them unable to see or hear their fellow Arab or Muslim feminists (160). She expresses her frustration at the inner "veil" of American feminism: 'Some of us were right there, in the forefront of the U.S women's movement in the 1960s . . . Where did that consciousness go? What thick veil is the U.S. women's movement wrapped in these days? Can we help you tear it off? Please tear off your western veil. It is blocking your insight' (161, 162). Al-Hibri's powerful argument calls for an anti-racist U.S. feminism that could take into consideration the integrity of Arab American feminists and the importance for U.S. women of all ethnic groups to work together on a common ground.

### **Methodology**

Many literary theories have been used to shed some focus on the purpose of this research. The literary methods are used here: post-colonial theory, feminism theory and transnational theory. Each one of them discussed some side of the theme of this paper. There was an effort to make a connection between postcolonial theory and the linguistic identity of the diasporic people in the new community.

Postcolonialism has become the most controversial and prominent term that has got a lot of attention within academic institutions and universities or outside them; in the critical theory field. It has been emerged out of the wishes for good, justice and equality. It has been developed out of the efforts that have been exerted in order to abolish the discrimination, marginality and domination. It is an attempt to overcome the oppressions that some nations have exercised over other nations

Thus, the integrations of cultures, identities, traditions are highly remarked due to the immigrations of so many nationalities to USA, and Arabs in particular which is considered one of the major themes to this paper. So transnationalism is used here as a literary theory to expose the mixing of thoughts, issues and confirmations and beliefs of Arab-American women poets in their literary pieces of works. This theory serves a lot in picturing the transnational politics, socio, cultures that had occurred in USA through the selected poems of the selected poets. Here the transnationalism emphasis the ways that how the multiple nations and nationalities have no longer able to control the negotiations through which social minorities add global dimension to their social practices of their social rights.

Feminist literary theory is still the domain of western feminism. Thus it should be put in the mind the problems involved in applying theory developed in the west to poetry produced out of multi-culture background. Feminist and other groups have struggled to organize around collective identity to resist patriarchal system based on individual "freedom", let individualistic works by Arab-American women can be read as feminist in the contest of Arab culture . In that culture collective ethnic, and religious identity and conformity behaviors are highly valued by the power structure. In fact Arab-American



women's struggle against the patriarchal society and system began with the assertion of their individuality and its rights. Later on, the poems show an increase in concern for national identity among other poets and writers.

### Conclusion

The contribution of Arab-American women poets to modern American poetry constitutes one of the major features of that poetry. They have emerged themselves and their talents mainly in writing poetry, novels and short story, but fewer interests are shown towards their works by the American readers. In the 1980s, Arab-American women's poetry gained momentum and emerged in greater numbers, because, their awareness to behave as active individual and active members as a result of interacting with the American society. Moreover the education became much more available to girls and women. Scholarly and critical attention was paid more to novels and nonfiction prose produced by them.

Well, Arab-Americans are being cut off from their Arabic roots. They have suffered from a sense of displacement and alienation. They have expressed their feeling of diasporic, and unwelcomed cultural hybridity greatly in their writings (poetry). However, their writings have only gained recognition after 9/11, when people's curiosity rose up to know more about Arabs and their culture. Such events of 9/11 have been distinguished the lineaments of post September 11 readers who have become eager to know about the works written by Arb-American writers which begin to appear more frequently in the bookstores.

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