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## **“Counter Discourse”: Writing as a Means of Resistance in Selections of Contemporary Arab-American Poetry**

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# Preface

This thesis explores how Arab-American poetry, as a counter discourse, is well employed as a means of resistance. Through their poetry, contemporary Arab-American poets write back against all forms of stereotyping that Arab-Americans encounter in the United States, especially after the attacks of 9/11. They also condemn the “war on terror” declared on Iraq and Afghanistan as one of the most devastating repercussions of stereotyping Arabs and Muslims as terrorists.

The United States of America has long been renowned as the melting pot of different races, ethnicities and cultures. For decades, people from all over the world have come to America in search of more opportunities and a better life style. There is now a considerable number of minorities in the United States. According to the U.S Census Bureau, the American society encompasses 122 different ethnic groups among which are, African-Americans, Hispanic-Americans, Chinese-Americans, Arab-Americans and others.

America has often been famed for its democracy which is claimed to be one of its core principles. Nevertheless, having a closer look at the Arab-American community as one of the ethnic groups in America shows a contradicting reality

to the assumed perfectibility of the harmonious multiethnic society of the United States. According to Yvonne Hadad,

[America] seems to be a nation that advocates openness and pluralism as foundational principles of its polity. But somewhere behind these principles lurks the possibility of an anti-Saracen heritage that is anti-Arab and Anti-Muslim as it is anti-Semitic, if not more so. (15)

The United States of America, which followed England and France as a leading country since the end of the Second World War, is claimed to have inherited from these super powers the legacy of anti-Arab and anti-Islamic prejudice. Therefore, adverse stereotyping of Arabs and Arab-Americans, especially Muslims is not a byproduct of 9/11. Rather, negative stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims are deeply embedded in Western culture with roots that date back hundreds of years. Such stereotypes embraced by many westerners, let alone Americans, have led in many instances to the victimization and humiliation of Arabs and Muslims. More seriously, they have also led to the breaking out of the "war on terror" against some Arab and Muslim countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan.

According to Edward Said “[T]he absence in America either of a colonial past or of a longstanding cultural attention to Islam [and Arabs] makes the current obsession [with Arabs and Islam] all the more peculiar, more abstract, more secondhand” (*Covering Islam* 13). Some scholars have argued that images of “the Arabs” are rooted in images of the “Muslim” as a dark and evil Other that was transposed from Byzantines to western Europeans and European colonists during the period of the rise of Islam and, later to the Americas (Naber, “Introduction” 23).

The Arab-American community, a deep-rooted racial group in the history of the United States, is regarded by many as one of the most thriving communities of this country. In many contexts, however, Arab-Americans are negatively stereotyped, or simply regarded as “Others”. One of these contexts is the political context where Arab-Americans are usually stereotyped as savage, depraved, lazy, cheaters, sensualists and Islamic fundamentalists, not to mention backward terrorists.

The attacks of September 11, 2001 came to add to the tarnished images of Arabs, and Arab-Americans. Arabs have been increasingly targeted, harassed and discriminated against

ever since. Many Arab-American women have particularly been the target of verbal and physical abuse, especially those wearing *hijab*, which many Americans perceive as the counter symbol of feminism and the opposite of “American liberty and justice”.

In resisting the state of being culturally imperialized Arab-Americans often employ literature, especially poetry, to assert their cultural identity. Poetry, thus, becomes an "arena of struggle" (Harlow 33). In this arena, contemporary Arab-American poets such as Samuel Hazo (1928- ), Nathalie Handel (1969- ), Elmaz Abinader (1954- ), Suhair Hammad (1973- ), and others can fight back the misconceptions and the false images generated by certain ideologies embedded in Western culture.

This thesis aims to investigate the way Arab-Americans use poetry to resist oppression and misrepresentation. It is divided into an introduction, three chapters and a conclusion. The introduction, “The History of Arabs in the United States”, provides the reader with a short survey of the history of Arab-Americans since the mid 19th century to the present day. It also addresses the history of stereotyping as one of the oldest



problems facing Arabs and Arab-Americans in the United States.

Chapter one, “Arab-American Poetry and Resistance Literature”, sets up the theoretical framework of the thesis. It discusses Barbara Harlow’s theory of resistance literature exploring the usage of language as a counter discourse to several forms of oppression. In addition, this chapter sheds light on Edward Said’s “Orientalism” as a key concept which helps to trace the origin of anti-Arab and anti-Islam ideologies. A survey of the literary history and literary achievements of Arab-American writers, in addition to the difficulties and the challenges they face nowadays, is introduced. This chapter also focuses on poetry as the most predominant genre in the works of Arab-American writers discussing its importance and its potential as a counter discourse.

Chapter two, “Arab-Americans Resistance of Stereotyping Before and After 9/11”, provides the reader with an analysis of a considerable number of poems which help in rebutting negative stereotypes of Arabs in the hope of helping the reader to reconsider such phony stereotypes.

Chapter three, “Re-writing ‘War on Terror’ in Arab-American Poetry”, explores a number of poems which deal with different aspects of the war on terror. This chapter uncovers the horrific face of the “war on terror” revealing it as nothing but a “war of terror”.

The conclusion sums up the findings of the thesis and assesses how far Arab-American poets have managed to resist negative stereotyping and its repercussions through their writings.

## **Introduction**

# **The History of Arabs in the United States**

Stereotyping Arabs by American mainstream society could be traced back to their first arrival in America. This stereotyping, which draws on a long history of misrepresentation of Arabs and Muslims; and which has taken different forms of discrimination and ill-treatment, is best clarified through a short survey of the history of Arab-Americans in the United States<sup>1</sup>.

The history of Arab-Americans, according to many historians, can be divided into three waves of immigration; Early Immigration, Post-World War II Immigration and Post-1967 War Immigration<sup>2</sup>. Sharon Abu-Laban relates each historical period to a certain Arab immigrant cohort: the Pioneer Cohort, dating from the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century up through World War II; the Transitional Cohort, dating from post world War II to nearly 1967; and the Differentiated Cohort, dating from about 1968 to the present (47).

In fact, there was not one reason to which the early Arab immigration can be attributed. Rather, there were many reasons why they left their native homelands. One of the major reasons is the unfair treatment they experienced, whether Muslims or Christians, under the Ottoman rule. Michael W. Suleiman states that the Turkish government exploited its citizens and helped to divide the population into

different factions which fight and kill one another, referring to the conflicts of the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. Suleiman further claims that the massacres of 1860 were the handiwork of the Ottoman authorities (*Early Arab Americans* 47). Another reason was the imposition of the draft in 1913 by the Turkish rulers on both Arab Muslims and Christians which accelerated their immigration to different parts of the world, especially North America.

Some historians believe that the harsh economic conditions which swept the Arab World at that time are on top of the reasons which drove, and still drive, Arabs out of their homelands. Nabeel Abraham refers to the shift of the trade routes away from the Levant after the opening of the Suez Canal near the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the collapse of the silk industry in the Lebanese mountains as two essential factors behind the economic deterioration at that time (17-18). The religious persecution from which Christians suffered under the Turkish Islamic rule and the political turmoil which plagued most of the Arab countries at that time were two determinant factors behind pushing many Arabs out of their native lands.

## **The Early Immigration: The Pioneer Cohort**

The early Arab immigration (the pioneer cohort) can be traced back to around the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, especially the 1880s. The majority of the early arrivals came from Greater Syria<sup>٧</sup>. Most immigrants were illiterate, unskilled males, of no or little capital. Nearly ninety per cent of them were Christians, with a miniscule number of Muslims<sup>٨</sup>.

The pioneers came to America pursuing one aim, to collect as much money as possible before they go back home and settle down. They never thought of staying the rest of their lives there; on the contrary, they thought of themselves as sojourners. Eventually they discovered, after being assimilated into American society, that going back home is not likely to happen, mainly because of the technological, economic and democratic gap between their homelands and their new chosen home. After realizing this fact, early Arab immigrants changed their professions to adjust to their permanent life in America. So, instead of being mere peddlers, they became owners of dry-goods stores and workers in factories<sup>٩</sup>.

These newcomers had a fairy-tale idea about America before going there<sup>١٠</sup>. For them, America was the land of

dreams, full of riches that waited for them to be reaped. Ironically, contrary to their expectations, when Arab immigrants arrived in the United States they encountered hardships and difficulties, which caused some of them to return home empty-handed. One of the major hurdles was language. Other obstacles were discrimination, prejudice, and fear from foreigners, especially Arabs, at a time when the Anglo-Saxon ascendancy was the predominant race in America and some European countries.

In spite of such difficulties and other problems, many Arab immigrants did not surrender and they started settling in the American Northeast and Midwest in states like New York, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Michigan and Ohio. Many of them worked in peddling dry goods and novelties. Some worked in the textile mills of New England and in the factories of the industrial Midwest; while others were engaged in farming in the South and the Midwest (Nabeel Abraham 18).

It is important to mention that though the first Arab arrivals tried their best to retain their traditions, religions and values by attempting to isolate themselves from the mainstream society through living in enclaves, their attempts were futile. The prevailing ideologies of the melting pot and