

# بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم





# شبكة المعلومات الجامعية التوثيق الالكتروني والميكروفيلم





# جامعة عين شمس

التوثيق الإلكتروني والميكروفيلم

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تحفظ هذه الأقراص المدمجة بعيدا عن الغبار





Ain Shams University  
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Department of English Language and Literature

## **Writing Homeland: Representing Egypt in Selected Poems by American Poets of Egyptian Origin**

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# **Introduction**

“Home travels with us. We are the vessels that carry our home through memories, through a scent” (Agosin, “Introduction” vi).

## **Representing Homeland**

Authors have been representing places throughout history; according to Leonard Lutwack, place is the richest metaphor for a writer (75). To concentrate on poetry, “[a] place may inspire, but a balance must be maintained between the place that inspires and the poet who is inspired, between object and subject” (14). These words designate the role of the poet; they highlight that his/her voice is essential. In good poetry that represents a place, the reader should find out the subjective viewpoint of the poet, how s/he feels, responds, reflects, rather than the objective viewpoint in which s/he only looks, sees, observes, and records. This is because “[e]very geographical location has its own set of unique physical characteristics and its own history, but the identity and significance of each site may have more to do with the discursive meanings projected upon it than on its actual physical and historical constitution,” as pointed out by Eric Prieto (14). It is the responsibility of authors/poets to present meanings to places through their representations. These meanings, which are “multiple meanings,” are portrayed according to the writer’s “subjective experience of place” (Prieto 14, 17). So, “poetry



transforms place by making it serve subjective and imagistic needs” (Lutwack 17). In other words, it turns from being merely a place into being an expression of the subjective experience of the poet and the source of his/her imaginative outlet.

Accordingly, places have to be “capable of arousing feelings and becoming the vehicle of meanings” (Lutwack 27). If the place is incapable of evoking feelings, there is no space for it in poetry because “[w]riting that celebrates places for their own sake falls into the minor category of travel literature” (29). This is similarly applicable to writing that criticizes places; in both cases, the produced literary work will be void of the author’s voice, contribution, and experience.

This dissertation investigates the representation of homeland via highlighting the voices and the feelings of authors. Despite the multiple interpretations of what and where homeland is, the reference to homeland in this study points to the land of origin of the selected poets, which is Egypt. I conform to the traditional definition of homeland, “[c]onventionally, a person’s homeland is his country of origin” (Jin 65).<sup>1</sup> It is argued that “[w]hether people emigrated freely or were uprooted forcibly from their native country, they could still be expected in most cases to maintain emotional ties to it” (Barrington et al. 301). Homeland memories usually haunt different generations of immigrants, “[w]hether removed from the subject by one or

more generations, several decades, or a few years, the memory and images of nation continue to inhabit the exilic imagination” (Seyhan 125). Homeland, in particular, has been chosen to be the focus of this study since it is, relatively, avant-garde in the field of literary studies, especially when compared to the foregrounded interest in the host land. Until recent times, migration studies, as Steven Vertovec points out, have been concerned with the immigrants’ adaptation in the host country rather than their relation to homeland (13).

In the case of migration, various types of emotional ties to homeland play a role in the process of its representation. Carole Davies assumes, “[m]igration creates the desire for home, which in turn produces the rewriting of home. Homesickness or homelessness, the *rejection* of home or the *longing* for home become motivating factors in this rewriting. Home can *only* have meaning once one experiences a level of displacement from it” (84; emphasis added). Emphasizing that homeland representation could mirror either the rejection of or the longing for home is logical and real, while claiming that home has meaning only in the case of migration is not accurate.<sup>2</sup> The notions of home rejection and home longing could result in what Eva Hoffman’s describes as the “risk” of the “demonized” or the “idealized” representations of home (52).<sup>3</sup>

Lutwack explores the relation between the place and the mood, “the mood of a person has much to do with determining the quality of the places he is in” (35). Replacing the “person” with the “author” and “the places” with “homelands” would justify the various, sometimes conflicting, representations of the same country by the same writer. The “mood” points to feelings which may include pride, joy, nostalgia, solitude, grief, or disgrace. Lutwak suspects the possibility of assuming “a fixed relationship between places and their effects” (36). A place which generates feelings of security, love, or joy at one moment may produce gloomy emotions at other instances, depending on the mood of the poet as well as on the situation or the current experience. This explains the failure “to assign constant emotional responses” to places which results in a state of “ambiguity.” Lutwack adds, “[p]laces are neither good nor bad in themselves but in the values attached to them, and literature is one of the agencies involved in attaching values to places” (35). Therefore, the representation of an “idealized” homeland does not necessarily indicate its perfection, similarly, the representation of a “demonized” homeland does not signify its inferiority. In short, “versions of the homeland are not whimsical; they are shaped by circumstance and serve a purpose,” as noted by Evelyn Shakir (n. pag.).

Migration develops the relation between the writer, more broadly the individual, and his/her country of origin. According to Olivia Edelman,

“moving represents change, and change can generate pain, even as change allows us to grow in various and unanticipated ways” (81). Edelman here refers to the growth in the perspective of viewing the native country. She maintains that as an immigrant, the land of origin is always inside her; however, she rediscovered it in the host country (80); this rediscovery is the impact of migration. In a similar way, Cristina Pinto-Bailey maintains that the host country has assisted her “to develop a critical perspective” of her origin country (98).

Edward Said argues, “[e]very scene or situation in the new country necessarily draws on its counterpart in the old country;” therefore, there is a state of “juxtaposition” in which things are never perceived “in isolation” (*Representations* 60). Said refers to the unconscious comparisons practiced by migrants between both places and which might be regarded as a motive to represent the land of origin. Said also assumes that in a sense the host land is in a “restlessness, movement, constantly being unsettled,” while home is a “more stable condition.” According to Said’s assumption, the stability of homeland might motivate some intellectuals to represent it. He goes further to assume the intellectual’s tendency “to be happy with the idea of unhappiness;” the state of “restlessness” affects his/her “style of thought” (53). This means that such state is inspiring for the intellectual; consequently, a desire for homeland representation is provoked. Contrary to the concept of happiness,

Said introduces the “torturing memory” model: “[y]ou can spend a lot of time regretting what you lost, envying those around you who have always been at home, near their loved ones” (62). This tormenting memory is also a good reason for representing the land of origin.

### **Rationale of Selections**

This dissertation studies poetry by four contemporary American poets of Egyptian origin: Maged Zaher, Pauline Kaldas, Matthew Shenoda, and Suzy Kassem. In this study, I attempt to introduce poets whose works do not receive enough attention and appreciation. I have chosen this topic mainly because little recognition is given to Egyptian-American poetry despite prominence of literary studies to the production of Arab-Americans from other origins, such as the Palestinian-Americans, Lebanese-Americans, Syrian-Americans, and Iraqi-Americans. A reader of literature might suppose that the experiences of American migrant writers of Arab descent are similar. This misconception probably originates from the fact that the Arabs almost share common cultural heritage, traditions, language, religion, colonial history, physical features, and geographical convergence. However, this hypothesis is not true; each Arab nation is rich in its peculiar experience which impacts the literary production of authors who belong to it.

Being an Egyptian who lives in Egypt, I have the privilege of understanding the poets’ cultural images and recognizing their



representations. My realization of the particularities of Egypt as a place and of the Egyptian society has been functional during my study; it has assisted me in analyzing the selected poems. Nevertheless, the presence of rare resources concerning Egyptian-American poetry, in addition to rarity of commentary on the poets' works, at least at the moment I started my research project, have been challenging. To surmount this obstacle, I succeeded in contacting the poets via different platforms: email/text messages/Facebook messenger/phone calls; this phase has been influential in providing the needed background information and in understanding their poems.

The diversity in the background and the personal experiences of the four selected poets has been appealing to me. Two of them belong to the first generations of migrants and two belong to the second generation. Two of them are males and two are females. One of them is a Muslim and the other three are Copts. These major variances result in the emergence of other differences which aided me a lot in forging a comparison. Throughout the dissertation I have limited my analysis to those poems which represent Egypt in order to maintain the focus on the poets' relationship to their homeland, which is the main topic of my research.

My interest in the poems which represent Egypt has led me to search for a theoretical frame that would illuminate different relations to homeland and modes of belonging to it. Nationalism-related theories have, therefore,

been selected. One more reason is that nationalism theories are capable of interpreting the psychological, historical, political, cultural, and geographical aspects of nations. These aspects are often manifested during the process of representation, “representation is exactly the place where ‘life,’ in all its social and subjective complexity, gets into the literary work;” moreover, it “can never be completely divorced from political and ideological questions” (W. Mitchell 15). The fact that various nationalism theories cover these aspects accentuates nationalism as the proper theoretical framework for this study.

### **Egyptian-American Poets**

Within the nationalism-related theories framework, the present dissertation studies selected poems by four Egyptian-American poets. They are Maged Zaher, Pauline Kaldas, Matthew Shenoda, and Suzy Kassem. The following section aims to highlight the experiences of each of the four poets, preceded by a background to the history of migration of Egyptians to the United States.

Emigration from Egypt to the United States is a relatively recent phenomenon when compared to migration from some other Arab countries. A tendency towards emigration from Egypt showed up during the twentieth century, though there were few earlier emigrants. Starting from the early sixties, the Egyptians joined the world’s “brain drain.” They turned to be “active emigrants” in the scientific and industrial development of their host