

## Review Essay

### Writing Relocation: Arab Anglophone Literature of the Last Decade

Susan Muaddi Darraj

In Rabih Alameddine's latest novel, *I, the Divine*, his heroine Sarah, born to a Lebanese father and an American mother, ponders her puzzling identity: "Whenever she is in Beirut, home is New York. Whenever she is in New York, home is Beirut. Home is never where she is, but where she is not" (99). Alameddine, a Lebanese painter and novelist, effectively encapsulates in a few lines the feelings of dislocation experienced by Arab Anglophone writers.

In recent years, the Western world has welcomed to its bookshelves the increasing number of works penned by Arab writers. Naomi Shihab Nye, for example, is well known for her poetry and books for children—most notably the young adult novel *Habibi* and the edited collection *The Space Between Our Footsteps: Poems and Paintings from the Middle East*. Edward Said's non-fiction, including *Orientalism* and *Covering Islam*, has revolutionized literary criticism and political analysis. Ahdaf Soueif, an Egyptian writer living in England, quietly infiltrated the British literary scene and became a finalist for the prestigious Booker Prize in literature—the first Arab and Muslim woman to be so recognized. Since the tragedies of September 11, 2001 the work of these writers has received even more attention, as Western readers seek to understand the "Arab mind" and world. In that respect, Arab Anglophone literature becomes especially important because it bypasses the need for translation and, poised between East and West, speaks directly to English-speaking audiences about the world on the other side of the divide.

Susan Muaddi Darraj, a freelance writer based in Baltimore, is pursuing graduate studies at Johns Hopkins University. Her work has appeared in *Mizna*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Pages Magazine*, *Sojourner*, *The Monthly Review*, *New York Stories*, and elsewhere.

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While the surge in Arab Anglophone writing in the West is relatively recent, such literature has been steadily entrenching itself in the West over the past century. The writings of Khalil Gibran and his famous “Pen League,” a group of Arab-American poets and writers who operated mainly out of New York in the early 1900s, certainly offer ample evidence that Arab writing in the West, especially in the United States, is nothing new. However, political events of recent decades, along with a major rise in the number of Arabs emigrating to the United States and other Western countries, have altered the geographic, political, and literary landscape, thus impacting the content and production of Arab Anglophone literary expression. With so much writing being published in the last decade, and with more on the literary horizon, it is appropriate to review the most important works of this genre, to reflect on its general themes, and to ponder its future directions.

Much Arab literature often focuses on politics, perhaps because the Middle East has been deeply scarred by colonialism, war, and religious strife in the past century. One could even persuasively argue that any work produced by an Arab writer, or by a writer of Arab descent, is necessarily steeped in politics, which could play a role “behind the scenes” of the work. Beyond this, however, Arab writers are exploring other themes, such as the rich material proffered by their hybrid identities as persons who live and work at a point midway between East and West. Like Sarah in Alameddine’s novel, Arab writers are similarly motivated by the experience of not belonging to one place, and they have been recently churning out novels, poems, short fiction, and non-fiction at a dizzying pace that constitutes an Arab literary debut in the West.

## Journals

Many of the debuts of the 1990s were showcased in three of the most important Arab-American periodicals: *Mizna*, *Jusoor*, and *Al-Jadid*. *Mizna*, which means “cloud in the desert” (specifically one that provides refreshing shade to the traveler) is the brainchild of Kathryn Haddad and other members of the Minneapolis-based artists association that goes by the same name as the magazine. The journal currently has 400 subscribers and an even wider reader base, and it recently switched from a stapled 8 ½” x 11” format to a perfect-bound, sleek publication with a glossy cover. While one of its missions is to educate readers about the Arab-American population, *Mizna*’s main goal is simply to provide a much-needed forum for Arab Anglophone writers (as well as non-Arab writers who use Arab themes) to publish their work, much of which centers on identity politics and world political events. “Arab immigrants have to deal with being seen as an enemy in a new land along with trying to survive here. Everywhere we turn, we see hostile imagery,” says Haddad, an experience that provides rich material for Arab writers in America and the West.

*Jusoor*, which means “bridges” in Arabic, provides a similar forum for Arab writers; its subtitle, *The Arab American Journal of Cultural Exchange and Thought for the Future*, perhaps best summarizes its mission. Edited by Munir Akash, *Jusoor* is a multi-lingual, multi-genre journal; a “typical” issue includes poems, essays,

literary criticism, and fiction in Arabic, English, and even French. Each issue is also developed around a particular theme, such as “Palestine and the Sacred” (Volume 4) or “Culture and Hegemony” (Volumes 5/6). One groundbreaking issue was the important collection entitled *Post Gibran: Anthology of New Arab American Writing*, co-edited by Munir Akash and Khaled Mattawa and distributed by Syracuse University Press; the issue featured creative writing by several emerging and established Anglophone writers, such as Nathalie Handal, Lisa Suhair Majaj, Elmaz Abi Nader, Hayan Charara, Sharif Elmusa, and others.

*Al-Jadid*, founded in 1995 by its current editor Elie Chalala, is a quarterly tabloid-sized review of Arab literature, culture, and the arts. Amy Wilentz gave *Al-Jadid* a favorable review in her column in *The Nation* (despite the fact that her novel, *Martyr’s Crossing*, had received a less-than-favorable review in the pages of *Al-Jadid*); Wilentz writes, “Magazines like *Al-Jadid*, which are concerned with niche obsessions or particular groups, also often speak with unintentional authority to the universal, to the general human experience.” She’s right. What *Al-Jadid* contributes that is unique from *Mizna*, for example, is the aspect of original and honest commentary on the state of Arab cultural production in the forms of reviews of books and films, as well as reports from Arab cultural conferences and events around the world. *Al-Jadid* is also very sensitive to the political climate; it published a “special issue” after the attacks on September 11th, contemplating the effects of the tragedy on Arab America and Arab-American culture.

## Poetry

Arab Anglophone poetry varies widely in content and style. Suheir Hammad, a Palestinian-American poet, is the author of *Born Palestinian, Born Black*, a collection of poems that explore the relationship and similarities between her own experiences of dispossession and those of African-Americans. Her verse has a hip-hop edge and a lyric rhythm that distinguishes it from the poetry of other Arab poets. Her other works include the memoir *Drops of This Story*, and she has been commended for identifying the commonalities between Arab-American themes and those of other ethnic communities in America.

In contrast, Naomi Shihab Nye makes her dual Arab-American culture and a nostalgic longing for a lost sense of home two of the most prominent themes of her poetry. In “My Father and the Figtree,” for example, she reflects upon the symbolism the figtree holds—how it represents her father’s grasp of his past in the “old country.” The figs are “assurance of a world that was always his own,” but that is lost to him now because of the stress of immigration. The figs also represent the memories of growing up in Palestine and remind her father how sorely he misses his home and its traditions. He “lived in many houses, none had figtrees,” and he tends the garden “half-heartedly, forgot to water, let the okra get too big” (*The Words Under the Words* 20). However, he keeps his culture alive in his daughter: “In the evenings he sat by my bed / weaving folktales like vivid little scarves. / They always involved a figtree. / Even when it didn’t fit, he’d stick it in” (20). His longing for the figs that represent his own happy childhood is finally satisfied when he

moves to a new house: “There, in the middle of Dallas, Texas, / a tree with the largest, fattest, sweetest figs in the whole world” (21).

Other poems by Arab writers also use foods as symbols of the “old country,” or to represent a time and a place that exist only in the past that one yearns to retrieve. Various foods evoke nostalgic longings for the culture that a new generation grew up without, and orally inherited by listening to the memories of older generations. It is no surprise that one of the most important collections of Arab Anglophone writing to be published, *Food for Our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists*, edited by Joanna Kadi, uses food as its unifying theme. Sections are labeled “Olives,” “Bread,” “Thyme,” and “Grapeleaves,” for example, and feature recipes involving that particular element as well as a discussion of the food’s symbolic meaning. Under “Olives, Our Roots Go Deep: Where We Come From,” for example, Kadi includes a recipe for Tomato Salad using olive oil; there is also a definition of what the olive means in Arab culture: “Olive trees in various parts of the Arab world date back thousands of years, and many still bear fruit. This is a fitting image for a discussion of our history. Olive trees represent our long connection to our land and our culture” (3).

## Fiction

Illustrating a deepened nostalgia and need to recover and define a sense of “home,” Arab Anglophone fiction has garnered most of the attention of this literary debut. The tendency to reconnect with a past that belongs in the “old country” is evident in many of the stories published in *Jusoor’s* special collection, *Post Gibran: Anthology of New Arab American Writing*. However, that need to reconnect often contradicts the feeling of ultimately not belonging to that “home,” whether or not one reaches or reclaims it.

In Joe Geha’s novel excerpt, “Back in the Black,” Sam, a Lebanese-American, revisits his homeland, but thinks, “I didn’t belong here, and everyone seemed to know it” (320). Though he has made the journey “home,” it is no longer his home. He adds, “Knowing the language wasn’t enough in a foreign country. Understanding one another, I decided, was a stretch, a gulf to be leaped” (320). He recognizes that some part of himself—his cultural consciousness—has been damaged by distance and time, the two main obstacles between him and Lebanon.

Other characters in Arab Anglophone works of fiction are depicted during the process of returning to a place they think could be home. In Diana Abu-Jaber’s *Arabian Jazz*, Jem Ramoud, a Jordanian-American living in New York with her sister and their widower father, yearns to understand the sense of incompleteness she feels; she senses that she is a cultural misfit in both American society and in the Arab social circles in the New York suburb where she lives. The idea of “returning home” is, for her, a self-deception. A visit by a distant cousin finally helps her to understand that she doesn’t have to make the physical journey in order to understand her identity, and that perhaps her identity can be comfortably reconciled somewhere between Jordan and New York.

Other characters discover “home” in between places as well, however unset-

tling and awkward that space may be. In her latest novel, *The Map of Love* (shortlisted for the Booker Prize), Ahdaf Soueif creates two parallel worlds—the past and present, Egypt and the United States—and focuses on the movement of women between those worlds. The most significant achievement of this novel is her success in bridging the lives of women in the East and West, highlighting common, seemingly timeless struggles for liberation and self-identification. Soueif’s earlier short story collections, *Sandpiper* and *Aisha*, are thematically similar: they both offer glimpses of life in the East and West, and the various ways in which women constantly struggle to realize their ambitions to fit into both worlds—and often to fit in between them.

Her first novel, *In the Eye of the Sun*, was also a major success. Soueif’s heroine, Asya, is not entirely comfortable in her native Cairo because of her family’s restrictions on her social freedoms, especially regarding dating. While she lives in England during the completion of her Ph.D., however, she becomes restricted in other ways. For example, her husband Saif, also an Egyptian, prides himself on being liberal and “modernized” in his thinking, but he is actually quite traditional, as Asya finds out. Their marriage becomes one centered around his needs, and he dictates its direction, often neglecting her opinions and ignoring her attempts to express her own opinions on both major and minor issues. Deeply hurt by Saif’s continuing indifference, she becomes embroiled in an adulterous affair. However, her lover Gerald, a budding orientalist with misguided preconceptions about Arab women, tries to control what she thinks and how she acts: “‘I hate people who go around trying to change people. The hypocrisy of it. ‘I know you better than you know yourself’—shit—what you mean is that the way you think I should be is better for you than the way I am’” (723). The postcolonial themes of sexual and political power in Soueif’s work are made clear by portrayals such as this one of both the East (Saif) and West (Gerald) as “imperialist” and patriarchal.

In *I, the Divine*, Rabih Alameddine’s character Sarah also lacks a sense of home—she finds it neither in Lebanon nor in the United States. Sarah’s mother, an American who married a Lebanese man, also experiences the clash of two cultures. As a young girl, she had her fortune read by an elderly Arab woman (the fortune is translated for her by an Arab friend):

You will marry a Lebanese man from an old family . . . . The family swallows. It’s difficult for her . . . . Tell her she’ll drown if she tries to swim. She must not fight. The two worlds will clash and she’s not strong enough to fight. She should give up and float. Tell her the son will carry her. He’ll know how to float between the two worlds someday. He’ll be the bridge. (226)

Janet never has a son, and Sarah is the last of the three daughters she bears (a “crime” for which her Lebanese husband, who desperately wants a male heir, divorces her and sends her back to America); in a sense, Sarah, the most widely traveled and worldly of her sisters, becomes that bridge; it is a role that she, due to her best efforts to settle peacefully in America and to forget Lebanon, hesitates to play but grows to accept: “Only recently have I begun to realize that like my city, my American patina covers an Arab soul” (229).

Being Lebanese and American is both a curse and a blessing and, after her lover David leaves her, Sarah decides to start writing a book about her life. Suffering from a nightmarish case of writer's block, Sarah is compelled to tell her tale nonetheless. Like a stage-frightened Scheherazade, she cannot move beyond the first chapter, and her book fluctuates between being a novel and a memoir—thus, the subtitle, *A Novel in First Chapters*. Alameddine's experiment with the form (inspired by Italo Calvino) aptly reflects the confusion and conflict embodied in Sarah's own hybrid and culturally conflicted personality.

In her collection *The Situe Stories*, Frances Khirallah Noble also ponders the results of the culturally hybrid experiences of many Arab-Americans. For example, in "Albert and Esene," Albert has taught his young bride how to read and write because, as he says, "This is the New World" (23). However, his illiterate sisters and their husbands interpret the initiative as a betrayal, as if Albert has broken the old-world traditions and transcended the dynamic that posits a wife as intellectually inferior to her husband. In "The American Way," Mansour needs to earn more money to pay for his daughter's eye surgeries as well as to keep up with his wife's expensive home decorating impulses. He opens an illegal gambling operation, which the police infiltrate one night. They scrutinize the players, all of whom are Syrian-Americans, suspiciously: "The men stirred, hoping to leave, their dark eyes resting on the intruders—but gently—so as not to provoke. 'We speak English and pay taxes in English and work in English'—their eyes said—'but we're different from you, you sons of bitches, and we want you to get the hell out!'" (93).

## Non-fiction

The theme of feeling like an outsider in one's adopted home is perhaps best expressed in Edward Said's controversial memoir *Out of Place*, in which he recounts his childhood in Palestine and his family's exile to Cairo, Egypt, after 1948. Said discusses the ever-present consciousness of being in exile, complicated by the controversy of identifying oneself as a "Palestinian." Moreso, the Columbia professor of literature and author of numerous works (*Orientalism*, *Covering Islam*, *The Question of Palestine*, and others) discusses the schism between cultures and languages that he personally encounters: "The basic split in my life was the one between Arabic, my native language, and English, the language of my education and subsequent expression as a scholar and teacher, and so trying to produce a narrative of one in the language of the other—to say nothing of the numerous ways in which the languages were mixed up for me and crossed over from one realm to the other—has been a complicated task" (xiii-xiv).

The memoir was made controversial by an essay by Justus Reid Weiner, who, claiming to have spent three years investigating and researching Said's past, summarily concludes that Said has crafted an image of himself as a Palestinian refugee when he is actually a privileged man from an upper-middle-class family who spent his childhood in Cairo's "lap of luxury." Weiner's real point, as interpreted by Arab writers and artists, as well as other intellectuals and scholars, was that Said's story embodies that of the Palestinian people, who have similarly not been displaced nor

exiled and have, essentially, portrayed themselves as victims for political advantage. The criticism constitutes a denial of the Palestinian experience of suffering.

The issue here is really that of the identity of the Palestinians, whom many consider to have no roots, no settled “homeland” due to their dispossession and current struggle for national liberation. Their story, whenever writers try to tell it, necessarily becomes political or is interpreted as such. As Said later wrote in *Al Ahram Weekly*, the Egyptian English-language newspaper, “My book was deliberately unpolitical. It contains no messages, except that of a life led in a very odd set of circumstances many years ago.” However, based on Weiner’s article, holding the status of a Palestinian in exile is an issue that is up for debate. Arab-American writers and activists, including Alexander Cockburn, Christopher Hitchens, and Hussein Ibish, rallied around Said, but Arab-America was left stunned by the attack on the credibility of its most revered writer and intellectual.

Arab writers currently are reluctant to separate literature in all its forms (fiction, poetry, non-fiction, etc.) from politics both within the Middle East and the United States, especially since the second Intifada (or “uprising” against Israel’s military occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip) of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the September 11th terrorist attacks have intensified the political spotlight on the Arab world. However, Arab Anglophone writers have moved beyond the didactic impulse to elucidate their concerns to mainstream America; rather, they have mined their cultural hybrid experiences and the pain of relocating to a new world that offers opportunity, freedom, and friendship, but can at times be suspicious, cold, and accusatory. Arab Anglophone literature has yet many miles to travel and many pages to fill before it will be pulled into that mainstream, but the future looks promising.

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