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LIVING ON THE HYPHEN: THE LITERATURE  
OF THE EARLY ARAB-AMERICANS BETWEEN 1870-1940

BY

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**To my father, mother and sister.**

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## **ABSTRACT**

In this thesis, I focus on the early Arab-Americans' experience from 1870 to 1940. I confirm that they did try to preserve their ethnic identity through language by applying Benedict Anderson's theory "imagined communities."

In the first chapter, I explain the first encounters between the American and the Arab cultures and the influences of the Protestant missionaries in the Arab countries. In the second chapter, I discuss the issue of Arab-American literature and how it reflected the experiences and turmoil of the early Arab immigrants. In the third chapter I apply Andersons' concept of "imagined communities" to the Arab-American ethnicity.

## INTRODUCTION

### THEORY, CONCEPTS AND DEFINITIONS

All good people agree  
And all good people say,  
All nice people like Us, are We  
And everyone else is They:  
But if you cross over the sea  
Instead of over the way,  
You may end up (think of it) looking at We  
As a sort of They! (Rudyard Kipling)<sup>1</sup>

Many important works have been written on the issue of ethnicity, multiculturalism, melting pot and assimilation in the United States. These studies have highlighted very central aspects and have helped in the formulation of the multicultural canon. Nevertheless, very few of those works focused on the Arab-American<sup>2</sup> ethnicity, especially the early waves of immigrants who came to America between 1870 and 1940 and settled in the New York, Boston and Detroit areas. Most of the already existing theories and studies emphasize the issues of racism, segregation, stereotyping, power,

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<sup>1</sup> Kipling, Rudyard is an English short-story writer, novelist and poet, remembered for his celebration of British imperialism and heroism in India and Burmais. He is the author of *The Jungle Book* and the famous poem "The Whiteman's Burden" in which he celebrated imperialism and social prejudices.

<sup>2</sup> The term "Arab-Americans" refers to the immigrants to North America from the Arabic-speaking countries of the Middle East and their descendants. The Arabic-speaking countries today include Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, pre-1948 Palestine and the Palestinians, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen. Somalia and Djibouti are also members of The League of Arab States and have some Arabic-speaking populations. . (Suleiman, Michael W. 1)

etc... practiced by the dominant white Anglo majority that holds power and considers itself the centerpiece among all others. An example of this is the Edward Said's theory on Orientalism.<sup>3</sup> Other theories call for a democracy and/or assimilation among the various ethnicities such as the melting pot theory. The contribution of this study is that it draws attention to a minority literature almost never explored before. What makes this study exceptional is that it does not approach the early Arab immigrants' experience by merely reaching out and analyzing the social and political environment the Arab-Americans were living in, but rather by digging deep into their culture, literature and language. Not only does this study bridge a gap that has long been neglected in the social history of the United States, the history of the early Arab immigrants to the United States has barely been touched upon, but also brings together essential elements of theory and literature that help us to understand the literature of the early Arab immigrants and shed light on the concept of their identity in the diaspora. This study will be an important document and reference for anyone, especially academics, who want to understand the early Arab immigrants' experiences and literatures from a very distinctive point of view that has not been touched upon nor interrelated in such a way prior to this study.

Although Edward Said, a Palestinian-American and one of the most important literary and cultural critics of the late 20th-century and author of *Orientalism*, has tackled the issue of Orientalism and how this discourse has been played out in the West to dehumanize the East, one thing that was not focused on is how the Orient displays itself when it is uprooted or displaced and what happens when the Orient attempts to move from the "them" side of the paradigm to the "us" side. From this perspective I will approach the Arab-American immigrant experience from 1870 up to World War II, looking at how literature, mostly poetry, of the early Arab immigrants, addressed this experience especially when it comes to their attempt to create their own communities in the homeland of the Occident, or as Benedict Anderson, author of *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* which first appeared in 1983, would call it "imagined community."<sup>4</sup> The way I am intending to use Anderson's

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<sup>3</sup> Edward Said's book, "Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient," established his reputation and claimed Western portrayal of Arab-Islamic culture revealed more about Western imperialism than the cultures Westerners observed.



work will show how language and print help create this sense of nationality. Here the Arab immigrants, who came from various geographical regions of the Arab world, wrote in one form of Arabic and published newspapers in Arabic, while being in America, thus strengthening the Arab identity of the immigrants due to the various topics and problems that were tackled in the publications. So although the Arab immigrants were leaving their Middle Eastern homes to work in an American environment, they were coming back to a home that was replicated to look like the native one. They emphasized their Arab heritage rather than celebrating and identifying with their new earned American nationality.

As Said puts it, "Orientalism was ultimately a political vision of reality whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, "us") and the strange (the Orient, the East, "them") (43). Orientalism helped define Europe's self-image because the center was rotating around the West rather than the Orient; in other words, in order for the West to be dynamic and civilized it was in need of an alter ego that is static and uncivilized. The construction of identity in every age and every society, Said maintains, involves establishing opposites and "Others;" "the European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self" (Said 3). Orientalism led the West to see Islamic culture as static in both time and place and incapable of defining itself, for one "can speak about Muslims, modern Islam and primitive Islam without bothering to make any distinctions" (Said 235). This gave Europe a sense of its own cultural and intellectual superiority. The West consequently saw itself as a dynamic, innovative, expanding culture, as well as "the spectator, the judge and jury of every facet of Oriental behavior" (Said 109). This became part of its imperial conceit. In 1810, the French author Chateaubriand called upon Europe to teach the Orient the meaning of liberty which he, and everyone after him, believed the Orientals knew nothing about. (Said 171-176)

Furthermore; Said argues that Orientalism has produced a false description of Arabs and the Islamic culture. This happened primarily because the qualities of Arabs and Islam

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<sup>4</sup> Benedict Anderson's book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* has become one of the standard texts on the topic of nations and nationalism. Anderson states that the combination of economic, social, and scientific changes with increasingly rapid communications resulted in new, potentially perplexing cultural paradigms associated with the origin of the universe and humans, their relationships, and history

were seen in negative terms. The Orient was defined as a place isolated from the mainstream of human progress especially in the areas of the sciences, arts, and commerce. Consequently: "its sensuality, its tendency to despotism, its aberrant mentality, its habit of inaccuracy, its backwardness" (Said 205). Said believes that this approach went wrong when it tried to assume that there could be such a thing as an Islamic society, an Arab mind, an Oriental psyche. No one today, he points out, would dare talk about blacks or Jews using such essentialist clichés. He also claims that "the archaic conjecture that Orientalism offered -- that Islam has possessed a unity since the seventh century, which can be read, via the Koran, into every facet of, for example, modern Egyptian or Algerian society-- made it even go more astray" (Windschuttle 4). He maintains that this notion is false because it ignores the important influences such as the experience of colonialism, imperialism, and, even, ordinary politics that the Arabs and Muslims underwent.

Nevertheless, Said's interpretations were not flawless. On the one hand, he appears to be holding Orientalism as the factor behind European colonialism while at the same time attempting to prove that Orientalism is based on false aspects. Keith Windschuttle, author of *The Killing of History: How Literary Critics and Social Theorists Are Murdering Our Past*, argues that,

If [ ] Said claims, Orientalism's picture of the Arabs is false, then it is difficult to see how it could have been the source of the knowledge that led to the European imperial domination of the region. According to Said, Orientalist essentialism is not knowledge, but a series of beliefs that are both distorted and out of date. Surely, though, if these beliefs are wrong, they would have contributed to poor judgment, bad estimates, and mistaken policies. Hence the political power of Western imperialism must have been gained despite them, not because of them.  
(5)

Windschuttle; furthermore, criticizes Said's "allegedly false essentialism of Orientalism, [because] not only contradicts his own methodological assumptions, but is a curious argument in itself. Going back to the origins of a culture to examine its founding

principles is hardly something to be condemned” (7). Windschuttle cites the example of the Koran that is taken more literally by Muslims than the Bible by Christians, and that in some countries it is not only a religious book but also a legal text. He agrees with Said that some “Western ideas about Islamic peoples confined solely to stereotypes derived from their founding texts and early history. But it is simply untrue that the whole body of Oriental scholarship has made this kind of mistake.” (8)

Windschuttle is not the only critic who seems to think that Said contradicts himself. Aijaz Ahmad,<sup>5</sup> a leading political thinker, cultural critic and eminent academic, criticizes Said for basing his arguments on the very canons that he was complaining about. Ahmad states that,

One of its major complaints is that from Aeschylus to onwards the West has never permitted the Orient to represent itself; it has represented the Orient ... But what is remarkable is that with the exception of Said’s own voice, the only voices we encounter in the book are precisely those of the very Western canonicity which, Said complains, has always silenced the Orient ... It sometimes appears that one is transfixed by the power of the very voice that one debunks. (172)

These criticisms share my point of view regarding the issue that Said tackles the concept of Orientalism only from a Western perspective. The only non-Western voice is his, and he deploys the discourse of the West, which brings me back to my point of view regarding Said’s ‘Orientailism,’ especially the paradigm of them/us, I regard this to be moderately accurate, nevertheless, in some cases this paradigm of “us” and “them” was not solely imposed from the outside but rather was generated from within. By this I mean

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<sup>5</sup> Aijaz Ahmad is a visiting professor at the Department of Political Science Professorial Fellow, Centre for Contemporary Studies, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library at York University. He specializes in South Asian politics and society as a whole particularly in the face of global changes and challenges. At the core of his concerns is the nexus between globalization, state and nation. In his studies he concentrates on issues like political economy, political Islam, post-colonialism and literary criticism. He is also a senior Consulting Editor at Frontline Magazine, Chennai, India.

that the Americans did distance and distinguish themselves from the Arab immigrants, thus leading to racism, but the early Arab immigrants, up to World War II also distanced themselves from the American community and constructed their own communities that would function as an “Oriental” home within a Western environment. In other words the process of hegemonic discourse formation that Said describes is turned inside out because he argues that there is no Orient since it is a Western projection and creation, while here, the Arab-Americans are formulating and defining characteristics of their ethnicity in the diaspora. This was not just limited to communities that the Arab immigrants lived in. It was also portrayed in the works of literature that were written by Arab immigrants whether it was poetry or prose.

Before embarking on the major discussion that the thesis is about, I would like to provide brief explanation of some of the major concepts and theories through which the issues of minorities and ethnicities were regularly tackled. This is necessary to reveal my contribution to the field of literature and towards a better understanding of the early Arab-American ethnic literature.

Identity is one of the essential elements in any ethnic discourse. The concept of identity refers to such features of people such as their race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, religion, or sexuality. It achieved prominence in the work of Erik Erikson who is a society and culture-oriented ego-psychologist that proposed that advanced identity formation should facilitate the ascendance of the ego strength of fidelity.<sup>6</sup> The use of the term identity reflects the belief that each person's identity--in the older sense of who he or she truly is--is deeply inflected by social features. And it is an undeniable fact of modern life that people have increasingly come to believe that this is so. In political and moral thinking nowadays it has become commonplace to suppose that a person's projects can reasonably be expected to be shaped by such features of their identity and that this is, if

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<sup>6</sup> Erik Erikson proposed that absence of a strong identity is labeled identity confusion and is characterized by the lack of a consistent self-image. Successful accomplishment of the identity crisis is linked to the ego strength of fidelity which is defined as "the ability to sustain loyalties freely pledged in spite of the inevitable contradictions of the value systems" (Erik Erikson). He wrote *Childhood and Society*, which contained summaries of his studies among the native Americans, analyses of Maxim Gorkiy and Adolph Hitler, a discussion of the "American personality," and the basic outline of his version of Freudian theory. These themes -- the influence of culture on personality and the analysis of historical figures -- were repeated in other works, one of which, *Gandhi's Truth*, won him the Pulitzer Prize and the national Book Award.

not morally required, then, at least morally acceptable. Each person's identity has at least two dimensions. There is a collective dimension, one that refers back to a group and cultural practices such as an ethnicity; but there is also what one might call a personal dimension, consisting of other socially important features of the person: intelligence, charm, wit, greed, that are not themselves the basis of forms of collective identity (Valverde18). The aspect of the collective dimension paves way to an ethnic belonging.

Ethnicity or ethnic group, by definition, stands for,

A collectivity within a larger society having real or putative common ancestry, Memories of a shared historical past, and a cultural focus on one or more symbolic elements defined as the epitome of their peoplehood. Examples for such symbolic elements are: kinship patterns, physical contiguity (as in localism or sectionalism), religious affiliation, language or dialect forms, tribal affiliation, nationality, phenotypal features, or many combinations of these. A necessary accompaniment is some consciousness of kind among members of the group. (Schermerhorn 12)

The concept of ethnicity both includes and excludes, simultaneously, certain people. It includes people in one group when the majority of the elements mentioned above are present among the individuals, and it excludes those who do not fit the description. However, it is very important to point out that the exclusion practiced in defining who does not belong is not the same as 'segregation' which is mostly affiliated with racism. Although ethnicity and race both refer to groups, they do not share the same constituents in their definitions of a group. Ethnicity, on the one hand, profoundly emphasizes mutual social, cultural and linguistic elements and can include a phenotypal factor which is not a major one in defining who is or is not an ethnic member of a group. On the other hand, race, emphasizes on the phenotypal/physical element as the *differentia specifica* of distinction (Van Den Berghe 9-10). In other words, race can be included as one of the ethnic constituents but not vice versa and because of this equation, exclusion in ethnicity is different from segregation which is a racist act against certain individuals based on their innate physical appearance. However, the equation can be manipulated and used to

raise issues of power and domination over other ethnicities. Ringer and Lawless, two experts on race relations and minority studies, believe that the treatment of racial minorities in America has been qualitatively different from that experienced by white immigrants; that racism is not a mere abnormality in American society -- largely confined to the South -- but built into the very foundations of the society. They point out the manipulation in America saying,

The they-ness imputed to racial minorities by the dominant American society has been qualitatively different from the they-ness imputed to white ethnic minorities ... So imprinted has this differential treatment [of racial minorities in the United States] been onto the very foundations of the American society from the colonial period onward that we have constructed a theory of duality to account for this differential treatment. (27)

These double standards in favoring one over the other or classifying minorities depending on racial constituents is what caused and deepened the rift within the American nation between the controlling white group and the rest of the ethnicities which, in turn, resulted in a flurry of various theories put forward as possible and plausible solutions for the ethnic/racial conflicts.

If one takes a look at the coins that are minted by the American Federal government, one can see this phrase: E Pluribus Unum.<sup>7</sup> Not only is this concept used on American currency but also in the various sectors of American life (schools, universities, etc). In other words, this was a direct and official reference to the many cultures and many ethnicities in the U.S. that were also reflected through literature. Since I have brought up the issue of the many cultures and ethnicities that are present in the U.S., it is necessary to show some kind of statistics that solidify the notion of plurality. According to the Immigration and Naturalization Service in the U.S. Department of Justice, the number of legal and illegal immigrants has increased since 1901. The following is a chart

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<sup>7</sup> E pluribus Unum is a Latin Motto which means "Out of many, one." It was first used as a reference to the thirteen colonies united into one nation.

provided by the Immigration and Naturalization Service regarding the flux of legal immigrants to the United States since 1901 up to 2001.

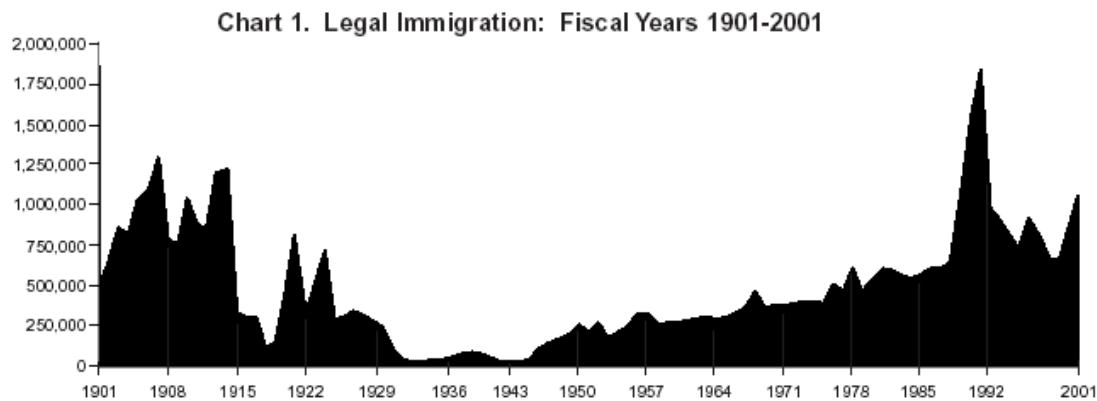


Figure 1. Legal Immigration: Fiscal Years 1901-2001

The literature of the U.S. represents a multicultural, multiethnic and multiracial profile from pre-colonial days to the present. The American cultural heritage has been enriched through plurality. The different communities that arose from different cultural backgrounds have been able to assert themselves through one of the fastest ways of recognition: ethnic literature. Literature has been able to articulate, formulate, naturalize and transform these communities from immigrant into indigenous and from diverse nationalities into Americans. Through this literature, a history was constructed for these multiethnic groups; a history that gave them a sense of nationality and a make-believe notion of an umbilical nexus with the land.<sup>8</sup>

The E Pluribus Unum idea was paralleled with other concepts: the melting pot and assimilation. The ideology behind the concept of the melting pot was a euphemism for Americanization. When it came to Americanization, the intent was focused not on preserving and celebrating ethnic heritage but rather on how American can one become i.e., assimilating the American thoughts and internalizing the American practices, etc. The melting pot concept was put forth in a fashion that stressed the important goals and the supposedly true nature of American society: freedom, equality and democracy for all.

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<sup>8</sup> This will be tackled more thoroughly when discussing how the Arab-Americans used literature to strengthen their sense of community and belonging whether it was to their native homes or their new ones.

However, the significance of this concept dates back to the early 18<sup>th</sup> century when Crèvecoeur,<sup>9</sup> an emigrant French aristocrat who turned farmer, wrote:

He is an American, who, leaving behind all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds... Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men whose labors and posterity will one day cause great change in the world. (54-55)

Nevertheless, this term would not actually have taken on much significance if it were not for literature. It became popular when Israel Zangwill, a Russian Jewish immigrant to the United States, used it in his play *The Melting Pot* in 1908.<sup>10</sup> In this play he wanted to celebrate the American dream and the assimilation of the ethnicities in America; the main character in the play David Quixano says,

America is the God's crucible, the great Melting Pot where all the races of Europe are melting and reforming. Here you stand, good folk, think I, when I see them at Ellis Island, here you stand in your fifty groups, with your fifty groups, with your fifty blood hatreds and rivalries. But you won't be long like that, brothers, for there are the fires of God you've come to—there the fires of God. A fig for your feuds and vendettas Germans and Frenchmen, Irishmen and Englishmen, Jews and Russians—into the crucible with you all God is making the American. (33)

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<sup>9</sup> Crèvecoeur wrote *Letters from an American Farmer* in 1782 in which he posed the famous question: "What, then, is the American, this new man?", as a new nation took shape before the eyes of the world. Addressing some of American literature's most pressing concerns and issues of identity, the book celebrates personal determination, freedom from institutional oppression and the largeness and fertility of the land, and also raises darker and more symbolic elements, particularly slavery.

<sup>10</sup> Israel Zangwill is a Russian immigrant who was inspired by the concept of American dreams. *The Melting Pot* opened in Washington, D.C. on 5 October 1908. As the final curtain came down that Monday night, Theodore Roosevelt leaned over his box and shouted to Zangwill: "That's a great play, Mr. Zangwill, that's a great play." The story of *The Melting Pot* remains a largely untold one, despite much recent and important scholarship on the play and the ideas of ethnicity and trans-ethnicity that it is said to have framed. (*Szuberla 1*)



This play is still in print and circulating because of the concepts that it tackles regarding immigrants and the new society. The concept that it helped popularize became, in a sense, a process that unites and brings the people of this country together. For there are millions of immigrants that come from around the world and all of them bring with them different qualities, traditions, languages and cultures; since they had to live together they had to compromise and try to find common grounds and shared objectives, thus resulting in a homogenous society or the melting pot structured society.

As for the concept of assimilation, which was also referred to in Zangwill's play *The Melting Pot*, it proposes the idea that the ethnic groups in a heterogeneous society will come together to bring about a new social and cultural experience. This process was defined by the sociologist Robert E. Park as following,

Assimilation is a process of interpretation and fusion in which persons acquire the memories, sentiments, and attitudes of other persons or groups, and, by sharing their experience and history, are incorporated with them in a common cultural life. (735)

The process of assimilation depended on several factors which have to be observed by the newcomers in order for them to assimilate. First they have to adapt to the immediate surrounding environment of the host culture, then they have to become familiar with the native language and interact more with indigenous people. After that, the immigrants have to understand and appreciate the new cultural values that are offered to them by the host country (Horak 124-142). However, these concepts of assimilation and melting pot were far from what was taking place in the real world, i.e. these concepts hold the newcomers solely responsible for integration and becoming part of the host country's social fabric.

In addition to that, these concepts appear to be advocating a promised Utopia for the immigrants if they play by the rules, while the truth is they were mere fictitious arbitrary creations of sociologists and politicians who were failing to understand the depth of the immigrants' problem that was not only experienced by one ethnicity but rather by the majority. For as Said foregrounds, "it is perfectly possible to argue that some distinctive objects are made by the mind, and that these objects, while appearing to exist objectively,

have only a fictional reality” (54). This notion or pretence of coexistence, especially in a society of multiethnicity and tolerance or democracy, finds itself, whether intentionally or not, harboring contrapuntal elements: assimilation and exclusion, reconciliation and resistance, integration and segregation, compromise and confrontation and so on; consequently, causing the centripetal-centrifugal trajectories to destabilize and undermine the claims of compromise and rapprochement. The result is “a group of people living on a few acres of land will set up boundaries between their land and its immediate surroundings and the territory beyond, which they call “the land of the barbarians” (Said 54). A good example of these contrapuntal elements is what happened to the Japanese-Americans during World War II. When World War II erupted and America took part in fighting against Germany and Japan, many Japanese and Japanese-Americans in the United States, especially after the attack on Pearl Harbor, were racially, ethnically and culturally discriminated against. The grounds for this discrimination were based on the notion that these descendents might feel a sense of patriotism towards their mother country Japan and cause problems for the US government. Many internment camps were set up to harbor these suddenly demonized descendents as if they were never American. Over 120,000 Americans of Japanese ancestry were interned behind barbed wires (Girdner and Loftis 1-32).<sup>11</sup> This racial and cultural discrimination is not the first of its kind in the history of the United States. One can trace its origins back to the slavery of the African-Americans since the independence of this country. Racism then was particularly against African-Americans who were enslaved. After the outbreak of the Civil War, the slavery issue was made acute by the flight of large numbers of slaves to Union lines who volunteered to fight for their freedom. Even after President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation,<sup>12</sup> the discrimination against the African-Americans went on being practiced openly up to the 1970s in the form of racism.

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<sup>11</sup> Japanese-Americans regardless of their occupation, whether they were professors, teachers, physicians, students, etc..., were placed in these camps.

<sup>12</sup>Emancipation Proclamation was issued by Abraham Lincoln on January 1, 1863, during the American Civil War, declaring all “slaves within any State, or designated part of a State ... then ... in rebellion, ... shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free.” The states affected were enumerated in the proclamation; specifically exempted were slaves in parts of the South then held by Union armies. Lincoln's issuance of

Regardless of the legislations passed by congress to put an end to it, most importantly the Civil Rights Act of 1964<sup>13</sup>, segregation prevented African-Americans from using a variety of public facilities on an equal basis with whites. African Americans were restricted in their use of public city buses<sup>14</sup>, park facilities, and restrooms, for instance. Educational opportunities were limited sharply by the practice of separating African-Americans and whites and providing African-Americans with inferior instructional equipment. Its traces can still be seen in the present American south where the confederate flag is still flown and where only several months ago the Senate majority leader; Republican Senator Trent Lott declared his racist attitude towards African-Americans directly and other minorities indirectly by praising Strom Thurmond's 1948 segregationist campaign for presidency suggesting the nation would have been better off had Thurmond been elected.

Although some of the political and social systems of the nation appeared to be in favor of a homogenous society, manifested in Emancipation Proclamation, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Affirmative Action policy,<sup>15</sup> for the most part, the structure of the society remained heterogeneous mostly because of the racist attitudes of certain

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the Emancipation Proclamation marked a radical change in his policy; historians regard it as one of the great state documents of the United States. (Franklin)

<sup>13</sup> The Civil Rights Act of 1964 protects individuals against employment discrimination on the basis of race and color as well as national origin, sex, or religion. It is unlawful to discriminate against any employee or applicant for employment because of his/her race or color in regard to hiring, termination, promotion, compensation, job training, or any other term, condition, or privilege of employment. Title VII also prohibits employment decisions based on stereotypes and assumptions about abilities, traits, or the performance of individuals of certain racial groups. Title VII prohibits both intentional discrimination and neutral job policies that disproportionately exclude minorities and that are not job related. (Robert D. Loevy)

<sup>14</sup> When African-Americans needed to use the buses as a means of transportation they always had to sit in the back of the bus because they were not allowed to use the front seats which were occupied by or reserved for whites.

<sup>15</sup> Affirmative Action is a term used to describe special efforts to recruit and employ groups (minorities and women) who may have been discriminated against in the past. It is designed to correct underutilization of qualified women and minorities; it is not designed to prefer them to the exclusion of other groups. Affirmative Action should not be confused with "reverse discrimination." Discrimination based on protected factors, such as race and sex is illegal. Affirmative Action strategies are used to recruit and select qualified individuals from an underutilized applicant pool. For instance, Affirmative Action may be used to hire a qualified white male, if an employer finds that white males are underutilized in his or her department. Indeed, any form of discrimination is an abuse of affirmative action and conflicts with the intent of the program. (Roach 2-7)

groups who considered themselves to be more American than others due to the fact that they were not hyphenated Americans. By hyphenated Americans I am referring to those who gained American nationality and are still defined and associated with their native groups; “the sons’ hyphenated status predisposed them to define their ethnic ancestry in terms of a bilateral rule of descent, selectively American on one side and selectively ethnic on the other” (Nahirny and Fisherman 276).<sup>16</sup> The ruling white majority considered themselves Americans while others were viewed as Afro-American, Latino-American, Irish-American, and Arab-American, etc. This group wanted the other ethnic minority groups to strive towards the culture of the dominant group and to let go of their distinctive heritage.

Orientalism and the melting pot ideologies share a major aspect: the practice of hegemony over the “other.” The paradigm of the “us” and “them” is implied in both. There is one center that is represented by the ruling white majority/the Occident (thoughts, culture, etc.), and there are many minorities/ethnicities/the Orient that circle and rotate around this center. These practices of hegemony and the marginalization of ethnic minorities are due to the fact that homogeneity was never materialized. Michael Novak, author of *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics: Politics and Culture in the Seventies*, describes the melting pot ideology and its application in the structure of American society by saying:

According to one social myth, America is a melting pot, and this myth is intended by many to be not merely descriptive but normative: the faster Americans—especially white ethnic Americans—“melt” into the British-American pattern, the better. There is even a certain ranking according to the supposed degree of assimilation: Scottish-Irish, Norwegians, Swedes, German, Swiss, Dutch, liberal or universalist Jews, the Irish, and on down the line to the less assimilated: East Europeans, Italians, Orthodox Jews, French, Canadians, Portuguese, Latin, Spanish.” (23)

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<sup>16</sup> The issue of living on the hyphen has been touched upon by many scholars from various perspectives; sociological, linguistic and literary. For additional reading, Bourne’s “Trans-national America” is a good article that tackles the issue of hyphenated identities and how time plays a role in such identities are viewed and changed through generations.

While Orientalism tries to tackle the methods of thought practiced by the Occident towards the non-Occident, the melting pot seems to enhance the dominance of the very same ethnicity that Said was criticizing. From these points I will deal with the Arab-American experience from the early stages of emigration in 1870 to the United States of America up to 1940 looking at how literature played a role in preserving, constructing or transforming the Arab-American ethnicity from heterogeneous to homogenous - that is, if they were accepted as part of this society.

In the first chapter I will be laying out the first encounters and exchanges between American culture and the Arab ones. This is vital for the reason that the United States never colonized any of the Arab countries. So there was no use of force in the attempts to influence the Arabs; however, there was a more important exchange occurring in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. That was when the first Protestant missionaries began arriving in Arab areas. These Protestant missionaries played an important role in advertising the American culture and values of freedom, democracy and wealth. This was all taking place while the Arabs were still suffering from a long Ottoman occupation that had had devastating consequences on the Arabs in all sectors of life: education, literature, work, freedom, etc. This chapter will help shed light on why the Arab immigration started to the United States and what the Early Arab immigrants' intentions were on the issue of preserving their identity and returning home, or settling in the new land and becoming American citizens.

The second chapter will address the literature of the early Arab immigrants in the United States and how it was framed and informed by the experiences of the Arab immigrants. One of the well-known facts about the Arabs is that they always celebrated literature, especially poetry. Their history is rich in poetry that has accompanied them in their victories, defeats, stagnations, and many other life situations. The Arab literary figures, particularly poets, were like historians recording through their poetry the everyday life of the Arabs. The early Arab immigrants imported this tradition with them. Many Arab-American poets thematized on the conditions of the early Arab immigrants in their literature. They were able to cultivate new forms of poetry writing that would reflect the accomplishments, burdens and barriers that have stifled this ethnicity.

The early Arab-American poets and literary figures held back from using the American language in their compositions. They were aware of their condition as a minority in the diaspora. Therefore, they intentionally used their native language in their writings. They did not use the colloquial or regional dialects in their literature. They used the classical/fusha Arabic. Since the Arab immigrants were from the various geographical regions of the Arab world, each of which had its own distinctive dialect that differed not only in enunciation but also in parts of the vocabulary system, for those reasons, the classical Arabic, which had the same form that was agreed on by all the Arabs, was used among the immigrants in their print and literature which created a sense of belonging and identity among the Early Arab immigrants in their diaspora. The issue of language will be related with Anderson's *Imagined Communities* and how language and print play an eminent role in establishing a sense of nationality even if it is in the outer margins of the original national borders.

## CHAPTER ONE

### THE ARABS: BEFORE AND AFTER 1870 AND THE FIRST ENCOUNTERS WITH AMERICAN INFLUENCES

From the moment this continent was colonized, racism has been fundamental to this country's functioning on every level. To this day, racism is systematically institutionalized in every aspect of the United States' political, economic, and social life. (Barbara Smith)<sup>17</sup>

This chapter will undertake to describe, as it has been rehearsed and touched upon in the Arab-American literature, the Arab-American emigrant experiences beginning with the imperial cultural American influence in the Arab countries and the factors that encouraged or forced the initiation of this mass movement from one of the oldest cultures in the world: the Arab culture, to one of the newest ones: the American one.<sup>18</sup>

The history of the United States includes many accomplishments, especially when it comes to immigration. There has never been such a massive free movement of humans from one location to another, nor have such diverse groups ever been assembled or concordantly come to live together in a single place. According to the Immigration and

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<sup>17</sup> Smith, Barbara has been publishing literary and social criticism for over 20 years. As a literary critic, she chastises the academic establishment for often misinterpreting and largely disregarding the voices of black women, lesbian black women in particular. In one of her most influential essays, "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism," written in 1977, Smith, contending that "black women writers constitute an identifiable literary tradition," pleads for a black feminist approach toward examining literature.

<sup>18</sup> The American culture is only 227 years old. The Arab culture is over 2000 years old.

Naturalization Service: since “1820 approximately 48 million of all races, from all continents and nations, with diverse religious and political beliefs have immigrated to the United States.” (1) This paved the way for the creation of two kinds of citizenships: legal and cultural. The legal citizenship is what the newcomers would be able to obtain after meeting the requirements placed by the Immigration and Naturalization Service. When they earn this legal citizenship, they are privileged to hold certain rights that they would not have otherwise, such as voting, government aid, American passport, green card, etc. However, this kind of citizenship does not guarantee the assimilation and acculturation of the new citizens. Many examples confirm the negative aspects of it, such as, “the enslavements of the negro ... the lynching of Chinese, the exclusion of Oriental immigrants, etc” (Glazer 6). On the other hand, one definition of cultural citizenship was “the peoples may continue to be different yet contribute to a participatory democracy. It is a claim to the right be different and to belong in the nation-state’s democratic life” (Delanty 5). Nevertheless, Delanty,<sup>19</sup> an authority on social and political theory, historical and political sociology, and the philosophy of the social sciences, prioritizes, it is a claim. The reality maintained by the ruling majority was that belonging to the cultural citizenship and being acquired, actually meant giving up all ancestry heritages, customs and loss of any kind of group identity in favor for the new one provided through the means of passage of time and adjustment to the norms of the new society.

Immigrants, aliens, foreign-born population, Latino, Afro, Anglo, Arab, etc... are some of the many terms coined to refer to those legal citizens on the American soil. Although the immigrants try to be good Americans and patriotic, such as what the Japanese-Americans did when they were discriminated against; they joined the army to fight in the World War II as Americans. As Louis Gerson, a researcher on political science, points out, they are forced by the society not to completely adjust; therefore, leading them to reinforce their damaged self-respect by strengthening ties with their

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<sup>19</sup> Gerard Delanty is Senior Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Liverpool. He is author of *Inventing Europe: Idea, Identity, Reality* (London: Macmillan, 1995); (with Patrick O’ Mahony) *Rethinking Irish History: A Sociological Critique of National Identity* (London: Macmillan, forthcoming 1997) and *Social Science: Philosophical Debates on Methods* (Buckingham: Open University Press, forthcoming 1997).



native heritage and people; thus resulting in the hyphenated identity (11).<sup>20</sup> These hyphenations are mostly circulated for political purposes rather than for cultural or social needs because,

Rather than emphasize aspirations common to all Americans, party leaders in their quest for votes stressed the uniqueness of the immigrant. In consequence, hyphenism became a badge of discomfoting pride ... and tended to enhance a feeling among those of foreign origin that they were inferior second class citizens and that their status as hyphenated Americans would be permanent.

(Gerson11)

This cultural racist profiling is mainly white racism<sup>21</sup> which refers to “the belief that because there are superficial differences among groups of peoples, generally classified as races, those superficialities, such as differences in eye shape, skin color, hair texture, stature and so on, signify a set of inherent and innate differences that stratify the races of mankind on two levels, the one genetically superior and the other genetically inferior” (Wong 3). Although racial differences should not lead to racism, the reality is that they do and “they can become,” as an Arab-American Scholar, Pauline B. Kaldas puts it; “symbolic of other differences that people fear. When those racial differences are seen in a negative light or presented in stereotypical ways, they can lead to racism.” This white racism in America has led to a ferocious ethnocentrism<sup>22</sup>, practiced individually or collectively, in which the culture of the whites is dominant over all other cultures that try to coexist. Consequently leading to a white racial prejudice<sup>23</sup> in which the whites’ ideology has to be unquestionably accepted by other ethnic minorities. The practice of such a prejudice can be seen in the many speeches of the American president George W.

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<sup>20</sup> Gerson in *The Hyphenate in Recent American Politics and Diplomacy* tracks the origin and birth of the hyphen and tackles the issue of the hyphen identity in the United States and how it was manipulated for political reasons.

<sup>21</sup> According to Howard Schuman white racism is “the belief that white people are inherently superior.” (383)

<sup>22</sup> Ethnocentrism is the technical name for this view of things in which one's own group is the center of everything, and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it. (Oxford English Dictionary)

<sup>23</sup> White Racial Prejudice is the unfavorable and hostile prejudgment of a non-white racial group and of its individual members, with a total disregard of the invalidity of the tenets of the prejudgment. (Kinloch 54-55)

Bush, after launching his war on supposedly terrorist organizations and states, in which he mentioned repetitively that “either you are with us or against us” and explicitly to the descendants of Arab and Muslim-American cultures that “opposing his policy would be unpatriotic.”

The circumstances of the current Arab immigrants differ from those of the earlier ones. The new Arab immigrants joined communities (relatives, friends, neighborhoods, and sometimes large communities) with a familiar environment that considerably resembled the culture of their own native land.<sup>24</sup> They were acquainted in advance with the customs, manners and demeanor of the new society through the media and other recourses that were not available or popular in the early 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The majority of these current immigrants partially communicated in their native tongue, consumed their indigenous cuisines, interacted with their compatriots in their own ethnic enclaves, practiced their religions in their own constructed houses of worship and even married someone with comparable heritage.

By contrast, earlier Arab immigrants, from underdeveloped or occupied countries, who had the same heritage, cultural backgrounds and set of beliefs of the current immigrants, faced enormous predicaments. They were not only obliged to acquire and maintain sustenance, but were also responsible for observing, learning, and respecting many unknown habits, lifestyles, and many other conditions. For these reasons, the early Arab immigrants appeared to focus more on replicating their own home countries’ communities and trying to preserve what other qualities possible from those enforced ones upon them by the host country. That is why part of the early Arab immigrants’ literature tended to be more nostalgic, romantic and transcendentalist/mystic<sup>25</sup> in its beginnings, later Arab literature in America transformed to a down-to-earth one to reflect

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<sup>24</sup> The current Arab immigrants are spread all through out the United States, unlike the early Arab immigrants who were mostly located in New York, Boston and Detroit. In addition to this, the environment of the United States (landscapes, metropolitan areas, etc) were not strange to the current Arab immigrant because many Arab cities modern architecture resembles the American one which was nothing similar to the huge difference that existed between the American environment and the Arab one in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>25</sup> Some of the Early Arab immigrants’ literature was labeled as escapist because it reflected a notion of distancing themselves from the metropolitan and materialistic society and retreating to nature and simple quiet places.

the depressions and turmoil of the Arab immigrants. It was a way of expressing and articulating alienation and dissatisfaction with the false or fabricated identity that the Occident was determined to impose on them.

It is difficult to actually try to pinpoint the date when Arabs began emigrating to the U.S.; however, the earliest date available goes back to 1870. According to Michael W. Suleiman,<sup>26</sup> an expert on Middle Eastern issues and editor of *Arabs in America: Building a New Future*,<sup>27</sup> the Arab emigration went through two major phases, more specifically, one ended with World War II while the other started after it (1). It is essential to point out that the Arabs who emigrated before World War II did so to flee from the persecution of the Ottoman and European occupying forces that conquered and subjugated that region for more than four and a half centuries. On the other hand, those who emigrated after World War II were not only avoiding deteriorating economic and social circumstances but also dictatorships that were brought to power with the aid of certain Western ‘democracies.’

Although the U.S. never employed or deployed force to colonize Arabic territories, during that time there was a cultural American influence going on, mostly in the form of Protestant missionaries that had been present since 1831. They had a long-lasting impact on the Arabs, especially on how they viewed America. According to Alixa Naff, an archivist of the Naff Arab American Collection at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC and herself the daughter of Syrian-Lebanese immigrants, “Their educational success ... left a legacy of far-reaching social significance for Syria, creating a bond between its people and America that remained unfrayed until after America’s recognition of the state of Israel”(34). However, the greater impact was through the American mission press, which with the collaboration of the American University, evolved “a modern Arabic idiom and style suitable for the expression of Western ideas,

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<sup>26</sup> Michael W. Suleiman is a University Distinguished Professor in the Department of Political Science at Kansas State University. He has written and co-edited numerous works in the field of Arab American studies, including *U.S. Policy on Palestine from Wilson to Clinton and Arab Americans: Continuity and Change*. He is an expert in Comparative politics; Middle East Politics; political socialization in developing countries, especially the Middle East; parties and political development; American images of Middle East peoples; the Arab-American community.

<sup>27</sup> This book is an anthology with many challenging essays written by Arab-Americans that help to offer a comprehensive cultural understanding of this ethnicity in the U.S.

giving rise to an articulate, Western-influenced intelligentsia and a journalistic and literary movement” (Naff 35).

The Protestant missionaries and educational institutes, did, indeed, have a colonial and imperialistic impact, but how immense was it and to what extent did they advocate the American society? Taking into consideration the terrible and deteriorating social, political, and educational conditions of the majority of the Arabs, who were mostly during that time under the occupation of the Ottoman Turks who did not care enough to develop these areas, they were living in their dark ages and were disconnected from the progress that was taking place in many other countries around the globe. Therefore, these Protestant missionaries would have been viewed as a window of opportunity to reconnect and catch up with the rest of the world. Nevertheless, we need to keep in mind that these Protestant missionaries were American and they were only offering things from an American perspective; hence, this “cultural practice and intellectual activity carry, as a major constitutive element, an unequal relationship of force between the outside Western ethnographer-observer and the primitive, or at least different, but certainly weaker and less developed non-European, non-Western person” (Said 56). The Protestant missionaries built schools. Their first school was in 1846. By 1860, there were 33 schools. They also opened the Syrian Biblical College (1866), which is the American University in Beirut now. There was a lot of competition between the missionary groups. The first thing the missionaries did was to translate the Bible into Arabic so the Arab people will have access to God without intermediaries (Abbas and Najm 10). One of the first books the missionaries translated in Greater Syria was Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*. Butros al-Bustani translated it upon the request of the missionaries. The book encourages the bourgeois mentality and philosophy especially when Robinson’s father preaches the middle between two extremes. Robinson Crusoe is a perfect example of the bourgeoisie: thirst for knowledge, belief in practical experience, love of adventure and strength of ambition,

My Father, a wise and grave Man, gave me serious excellent Counsel against what he foresaw was my Design. He call'd me one Morning into his Chamber, where he confined by the Gout, and expostulated very warmly me upon this

Subject: He ask'd me what Reasons more a meer wandering inclination I had for leaving my Father House and my native Country, where I might be well introduced, and had a Prospect of raising my Fortunes Application and Industry, with a Life of Ease and Pleasure He told me it was for Men of desperate Fortunes on one Hand, or of aspiring, Superior Fortunes on the other, who went abroad upon Adventures, to rise by Enterprize, and make themselves famous in Undertakings of a Nature out of the common Road; that these things were all either too far above me, or too far below me; that mine was the middle State, or what might be called the upper Station of *Low Life*, which he had found by long Experience was the best State in the World, the most suited to human Happiness, not exposed to the Miseries and Hardships, the Labour and Sufferings of the mechanick Part of Mankind, and not embarass'd with the Pride, Luxury, Ambition and Envy of the upper Part of Mankind. He told me, I might judge of the Happiness of this State, by this one thing, *viz.* That this was the State of Life which all other People envied, that Kings have frequently lamented the miserable Consequences of being born to great things, and wish'd they had been placed in the Middle of the two Extremes, between Mean and the Great; that the wise Man gave his Testimony to this as the just Standard of true Felicity, when he pray to have neither Poverty or Riches.

He bid me observe it, and I should always find, that the Calamities of Life were shared among the upper and lower Part of Mankind; but that the middle Station had the fewest Disasters, and was not expos'd to so many Vicisitudes as the higher or lower Part of Mankind; nay, they were not subjected to so many Distempers and Uneasiness either of Body or Mind, as those were who, by vicious Living, Luxury and Extravagancies on one Hand, or by hard Labour, Want of Necessaries, and mean or insufficient Diet on the other Hand, bring Distempers upon themselves by the natural Consequences of their Way of Living; *That* the middle Station of Life was calculated for, all kind of Vertues and all kinds of Enjoyments; that Peace and Plenty were the Hand-maids of a middle Fortune; that Temperance, Moderation, Quietness, Health, Society, all agreeable Diversions, and all desirable Pleasures, were the Blessings attending

the middle Station of Life; that this Way Men went silently and smoothly thro' the World, and comfortably out of it, not embarass'd with the Labours of the Hands or of the Head, not sold to the Life of Slavery for daily Bread, or harrast with perplex'd Circumstances, which rob the Soul of Peace, and the Body of Rest; not enrag'd with the Passion of Envy, or secret burning Lust of Ambition for great things; but in easy Circumstances sliding gently thro' the World, and sensibly tasting the Sweets of living, without the bitter, feeling that they are happy, and learning by every Day's Experience to know it more sensibly. (Defoe 10-11)

Crusoe starts from scratch. He travels, tames nature, worships God, observes Sunday, and preserves the spiritual integrity. He saves a black man from cannibals, reforms him and calls him Friday. He approaches others with Christian tolerance. Robinson Crusoe is a perfect example of the bourgeoisie: thirst for knowledge, belief in practical experience. The missionaries translated this novel on purpose. They are the new Robinson Crusoes coming to civilize the Fridays of the Arab world. Many of the Arab people might accept them due to their oppressive conditions. “They [Protestant missionaries] wanted to push people against the feudalist authorities of the Ottomans. More importantly, they wanted to encourage the spirit of individualism. The idea never to lose sight of God is also strongly there” (Abbas and Najm 15). It was no mere coincidence that missionaries started from the Lebanon area. The area of Lebanon, specifically Mount Lebanon, was governed by a Catholic Christian Ottoman government that was appointed by the sultan and approved by the West. This area in general “remained Western-oriented autonomous part of the Syrian province ... until it was terminated by the revolutionary Young Turk government of the Ottoman Empire in 1915” (Naff 29). In addition to this atmosphere, Lebanon had a major seaport; therefore, traders decided to settle there, which, in turn, made it the center for the rise of the Arab bourgeois class that was being encouraged by the American missionaries.

In addition to all that has been stated, the reason why these Protestant missionaries were able to achieve some kind of success was not solely dependent on the fact that they were Western, American or more economically advanced, but, also, because the Arabs

were eager to catch up with growth that was going on around them in the world whether it was in the West or the Far East. One of the immigrants to the United States stated in an interview reported by the editor of *The Independent* that,

The teacher [in an American mission school] had a great many pictures of American cities, streets, and scenes, and I could see that life in that land is very different from ours. I heard about the telephone, telegraph and railroad, and as I already knew about ships on account of seeing them go by on the water, it began to dawn on me that there was a very great and active land outside Mt. Lebanon and that it might be possible to find something better to do than be a monk. (Hitti 55)

The missionaries also addressed women's issues. Both missionaries and Arab intellectuals felt that without learned and liberated women, the future would be hopeless. Butros al-Bustani,<sup>28</sup> who worked as a teacher, translator and author, with the Americans, supported the women's liberation movement. Most intellectuals joined hands in criticizing the old-fashioned institutions and calling for global enlightenment. The irony is that while the society benefited a lot, the champions of enlightenment suffered too much (being persecuted).<sup>29</sup>

Although Homi Bhabha, one of the most recognized names in the critical field known as *Postcolonialism* with a distinct interest in ethnicity, culture and hybridity, would prefer to acknowledge this as what he calls "hybridity" in which the colonized people would have co-opted and transformed various elements of the colonizing culture, one needs to keep in mind that America never colonized the Arab countries in the literal sense but rather in an influential rapprochement with the already occupied people. The Protestant missionaries addressed the issues that the Arab people longed for and tried to provoke a sense of historical and regional specificity. The historical connection was that the Americans were once themselves under occupation; therefore, they can appreciate the Arabs' need and yearning for a sovereign country of their own in which they govern

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<sup>28</sup> Butros Al Bustani is a very well known and celebrated intellectual in the Arab world. He has many significant publications on the conditions of the Arabs and the Arab intellectuals. He also called for an uprising against the Ottoman occupation. So it is not a coincidence that the missionaries chose him to translate the *Bible* and other books.

<sup>29</sup> Many of the intellectual figures were persecuted by the Ottomans who accused them of creating chaos and conflicts in society. Some were put in prison and others expelled from their towns.

themselves. As for the regional specificity, it was established through a religious method where the Arab land is the cradle and birth place of Jesus Christ and as Christians [the Protestant missionaries] it was their duty to help the weak and the oppressed: the Arabs.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, the Americans and the Arabs did not blend into each other and become one, thus weakening the idea of strong and weak cultures where the strong one overwhelms the other and replaces it. The Western institutional structures that were presented for the Arabs' adaptation could not have been the only answer for the occupied Arab people. Therefore, the notion of escaping from the Ottoman occupation, the need to lead a free life where there were no political or religious conflicts and persecutions paved the way for creating the desire to emigrate to America in which these things were promised. So, although these Protestant missionaries and educational facilities had had their influence, the remaining two points were the occupation and deteriorating conditions of the Arabs. Without these two factors, the Protestant missionaries would not have achieved noticeable influences. It might sound rather fallacious to talk about impact of the missionaries when the Arabs themselves wanted to emigrate. Worse still, it appears to be so illogical, someone might say, to talk about American dominance over the Arabs when the Americans offered, so it seems, nothing but an outlet and a safe haven. However, the incredible contrast between what the missionaries tabulated and propagandized and the reality that confronted the immigrants explains it all. For upon arrival the emigrants went through what might be called a coup d'état in the full sense of the word. All their expectations were betrayed. The promised utopia was nothing but an infernal dystopia. One of the factors that led to such dismay was "the tourists with their manifestations of munificent wealth, the hundreds of American travelers and tourists annually poured into the Holy Land acted as an object lesson before the eyes of the people demonstrating the riches of the United States" (Hitti 55). These tourists would show the Arab people pictures of America: the tall buildings, the paved streets, lit streets, etc, which, in turn, encouraged them to immigrate in the hope of earning a good living as these tourists but

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<sup>30</sup> I would like to clarify that I am neither advocating the supremacy of the American people nor the American culture. I am merely trying to show that the environment that the American missionaries came from was more relaxed than that of the Arabs i.e. there was no occupation, and the economic situation was better than that of most of the Arabs who profited least from their work because the Ottoman government was paying poor salaries.



when they arrived to America they found out that this was not the case; many of them ended up working as peddlers and living in run down places.<sup>31</sup>

The immigration of the Arabs here is not merely an attempt to have a better opportunity or to be included into a more advanced nation or identity. It is an act of diaspora, breaking away, and being uprooted because many of the Arab immigrants were forced into exile by the occupation and deteriorating social and economic conditions. As Arnold Ages<sup>32</sup> puts it, “their isolations from the [rest of the] world exacerbated the feeling of rootlessness that plagued them everywhere” (39). Even though, tourists and missionaries were present, they were limited to certain areas. Many of the Arabs did not get a chance to meet foreigners or encounter any other lifestyles other than that of the Ottomans in charge. One might say how could have the Arabs felt a sense of rootlessness while being in their own homes? First of all, many of the youth and middle aged men were drafted by the Ottoman military and were sent to fight for the expanding empire and then later on forced to defend it while it was collapsing. Next, most of the intellectuals were forced to move to the Ottoman capital in an attempt to deprive the Arab population of knowledge; this “dislocation marks the essential condition of the exile, a status between place and loss” (Redfield and Tomaskova 73). A third reason for the Arabs’ sense of rootlessness was because the Ottomans and then later on the European occupiers banned the use of Arabic language in public places like government offices or schools and forced their own languages instead. Ottomanization, Gallicization and Anglicization were colonial projects to eradicate and terminate Arabic in an endeavor to liquidate the essence of Arabism. The Turks practiced systematic Ottomanization and tried hard to impose their language on the parts of the Arab world they occupied in the same way the French colonizers prioritized Gallicization to make sure that the countries will be permanent colonies. The chronic impact is still visible in places like Lebanon and Algeria. Similarly, the British deployed Anglicization for the same purposes. *Season of Migration to the North* by Tayyeb Salih, a Sudanese author, is a solid example about such colonial strategies, the hero Mustafa was selected by the British and taken to Britain

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<sup>31</sup> The life of the immigrants will be tackled further more in chapter two.

<sup>32</sup> Arnold Ages is the author of *The Diaspora Dimension*. It is on the Jewish Diaspora; however, many of the things he relates to the Jewish experience appear relevant to what the Arabs were going through under brutal Ottoman and later on Western occupation.

where they think they will have him reformed and reshaped. The reason is only that by contrast to his schoolmates, he is good at English. Those behind him in their command of English have been left behind. These conditions were practiced for over four and a half centuries of Ottoman rule that created a sense of frustration.

This sense of frustration was further deepened by the deteriorating economic conditions. The economic landscape was impoverished agriculture and a very poor economy. With the increasing of free trade in Europe, the suffering here, in the Arab countries under Ottoman occupation, increased because there was no economic protection. Politically, the Ottomans encouraged corruption and religious or sectarian conflicts to weaken the Arab regions, especially Lebanon, because Lebanon in the 19<sup>th</sup> century witnessed the rise of the bourgeoisie. The spirit of individualism flourished. Similarly, translations of European books flourished as well as attempts by the intellectuals for salvation out of the stagnant situation (Abbas and Najm 25). As I mentioned earlier, most of the youth and middle-aged men were drafted into the military and those who were able to avoid it barely found jobs. This condition was juxtaposed to a totally different one in America. The steamships that brought the American Protestant missionaries began to recruit Arab workers because it was cheap labor. In addition to that,

the immigrants were attracted to the United States by its accelerating urbanization and industrialization, which required a greater workforce than was available in their country in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Labor, therefore, was recruited from abroad by agents of industry, steamship lines, and even by the less populated western states and territories. (Naff 26)

So, there were conditions on both sides, American and Arab, which would fuel the beginning of immigration. The rapidly expanding American industry needed labor and the growing urbanization needed more population, while, on the other side of the ocean, politically there was chaos and the writers and immigrants failed to find a place for themselves in the society ruled by Ottomans. They failed to make serious changes. Hence many of them decided to immigrate overloaded with frustration and disappointment. The majority of Arabs who were not able to tolerate their conditions any more, whether they were farmers, villagers, craftsmen, intellectuals, Muslims, Christians, politicians, etc,

needed to escape the tyranny and hopelessness imposed by occupying forces and find jobs to support their families. Others decided to stay. A couple of reasons for those who did choose to stay were because they could not afford the costs of the trip or because they were benefiting from the corruption of the Ottomans in charge.

As emigration began, many people from different classes and backgrounds left for America. There were peasants, farmers, craftsmen, aristocrats, poets, writers, politicians, etc... all heading to the United States. Many of these immigrants came without any intention of settling there permanently.

**CHAPTER TWO**

**THE ARAB-AMERICAN LITERATURE AND ITS PORTRAYALS OF THE  
ARAB-AMERICAN'S LIVES**

There is an enduring representation of 'Arab-' as not quite American-, not quite free, not quite white, not quite male, not quite persons in the civil body of the nation. (Saud Joseph)<sup>33</sup>

The emphasis in this chapter will be on the development of the Arab-American identities from Arab to becoming American, exploring the various accomplishments, burdens and barriers that have stifled this ethnicity and hindered it from an immediate and complete integration as American and how their literature, which was mostly written in Arabic, has accompanied them in their ups and downs reflecting the social, political and economic situations that they were enduring. It will also attempt to trace the topics represented in the Early Arab-American literature and how the culture of the Occident was reflected in the literature of the Arab-Americans living in the multiethnic environment of the United States.

As emigration began, many of the first Arab settlers in America started out as peddlers who roamed the American cities, towns and rural areas. Most of them lived in settlements in very poor conditions; nevertheless, they were able to support each other

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<sup>33</sup> Dr. Suad Joseph is a leading scholar of Middle East Women's Studies. She is respected nationally and internationally for her work in bridging Women's Studies in the U.S. and the Arab world. Her numerous books and articles cover subjects ranging from politics of Arab American citizenship to women's rights, children's socialization, and family/state relations in the Middle East.

and receive the new Arab immigrants. This style of life lasted all the way up the late 1940s when the Arab immigrants began accepting the culture they lived in and the fact that they are being influenced and Americanized. They yielded to acculturation. The immigrants started out with an aim of just living as Arabs in America, but due to all the hard labor they had to put in and due to the similarities they generated between themselves and the American labors, there was little place for inferiority according to some of their personal beliefs. Alixa Naff points out that the Syrian immigrants,

thought they perceived in the behavior of Americans they encountered on the roads and the settlements, a number of similarities with themselves. Most Americans, they observed, dressed simply, labored hard, attended church and lived by Christian values, visited neighbors, and lived frugally and morally. Since that is how they viewed themselves, the comparison generated little cause for inferiority. (262)

Nevertheless, no matter how many similarities they tried to find, there was always something impeding them from establishing a firm national connection with the nation that has offered them citizenship i.e. America. Despite the fact that they were “classified as whites by government definitions, they were excluded from discussions of white ethnicity and were popularly perceived as nonwhites” (Majaj 320). First they were perceived as whites, then as Caucasians, after that as Asiatic. Although the Arabs in America were “scientifically identified as Caucasians, their popular perception as nonwhite was so persuasive that courts were willing to privilege common knowledge over scientific evidence when the two were at odds” (Majaj 322). This racial classification was far worse especially in the segregated south where the Ku Klux Klan was ascending. Arabs were often considered as colored regardless of the country of origin. Those who had earned American citizenship had difficulties in obtaining voting rights. A candidate for a local office in Birmingham in the 1920s passed out handbills that read “They have disqualified the Negro, an American citizen from voting in the white primary. The Greek and the Syrian should also be disqualified. I DON’T WANT THEIR VOTES. If I can’t be elected by white men, I don’t want the office” (Dehmer 38-39). This comes as no surprise to Said, for he thinks that one of the reasons that have contributed to this negative view of the Arabs, especially the early 20<sup>th</sup>, is “the absence of

any cultural position making it possible either to identify with or dispassionately to discuss the Arabs or Islam” (27). In other words, there was no effort by the host country to attempt to understand the various cultural, social, religious or economical histories of its newly claimed citizens. Instead they were exploited and resented and lived a low social status which heightened ethnic feeling among the majority of the Arab-Americans.

This kind of view towards the Arab immigrants created a split among the immigrants. Some of them retreated to their own communities and tried to stay in the shadows, while the others tried to imitate the American way of life and character. The Americanization of some Arab minds produced a divide between those who began considering themselves Americanized and those who were still trying to hold on to their roots. Naff reports a conversation between an Americanized Syrian and a nationalist Syrian,<sup>34</sup>

Americanized Syrian: Are you still a villager? Haven't you become civilized?

Syrian Nationalist: Do good manners allow you to insult me this way when you are pretending to be civilized?

Americanized Syrian: We alone know what it is to be civilized and we regret that you are not one of us [...]. Don't you understand that we are all intelligent? For when we become Americanized, we are able to earn more without working hard and we help each other by gaining greater prestige. (263-264)

These conflicts and confrontations were reflected in the Arab-American literature, in particular poetry, before World War II, because it was one of the traditions that the Arab poets and authors preserved, especially in the poetic discourse. It was the way they communicated their thoughts and sufferings to their families and friends in their native countries. This tradition is a very old one; there is “a belief in poetry that could be traced back to the lips of the pre-Islamic tribes; the poets of Phoenicia, such as Meleager of Tyre; and even back to the Canaanite authors of portions of the *Song of Songs*” (Orfalea and Elmusa 2). Preserving this practice was one way of sustaining their identity and customs. They even wrote it in Arabic rather than English.<sup>35</sup> After that they would

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<sup>34</sup> This conversation was reported in *El-hoda* newspaper on March 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1898.

translate it, or have it translated into English. As I mentioned earlier many of them had come with the intention of going back and that was one of the factors that kept some of them away from integrating with their social environment, thus resulting in their shying away from participating in American politics and settling in the shadows.

The Al-mahjar<sup>36</sup> poetry, a phrase that refers to the literature of the immigrants, is a co-product of the east/Arab and the west/America. It is a hybridization of the Arab sophism and the western materialism. On the one hand, it is realist as a result of the direct confrontation, and immediate contact, with the new status in the United States. The new landscape of suffering in the diaspora consolidates that realism. On the other hand, it is romantic because of the nostalgia and the desire for any escapist paraphernalia. Gregory Orphalea and Sharif Elmusa, editors of one of the few anthologies on Arab-American poetry, describe the Al-mahjar poetry as being inter-textual owing to the intense exposition to all literary genres and influences that existed in the West such as the influence, not only of Romantic poets like Wordsworth, Keats and Blake, but of the American Transcendentalists Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman. (1-17)

In general, Al-Mahjar poetry calls for renewal and resurrection. It is against the classical, the conventional and the conservative. This is not unexpected. Most of the poets came in touch with Europe and America through the Christian missionaries sent to the Arab countries. These poets, in the new land, felt free from all the classical restrictions concerning the composition of poetry. Much imagery was borrowed from nature, and they continually contrasted the natural world with the human world. They recognized nature as a rich store of symbols that provided both the emotional and intellectual apparatus for poetry. They stressed the sanctity of nature and celebrated it, learned from it and associated with it, not necessarily to explain it but to understand it and reveal it in action and thought, and above all in poetry,

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<sup>35</sup> The reason for using the Arabic language to write their poetry, although they were living in America, will be discussed in chapter three in relation with their attempts to create an Oriental community or a replica of their native homes.

<sup>36</sup> The term Al-mahjar is an Arabic word that refers to the countries where the Arab immigrants have settled in. The literature that was produced by these immigrants was called Adab Al-mahjar or the Literature of Al-mahjar.

This literature distinguishes itself by prioritizing time and the economy of expression. Gibran and Naimy are the best representatives. Gibran formulated the theory of emigrant literature and Naimy articulated its canon and rubric in his book *Al-Ghirbal* (The sieve). (Al-Miwesh 15)

The major characteristics of the Al-mahjar Poetry are:

1. Although the rhythm is fixed, there is a lot of variation of rhyme and line length.
2. Short meters are preferred to the longer ones.
3. There is simplicity of diction. Images are not far-fetched. Spontaneity is dominant so that there is no place for artificiality. The focus is on the intrinsic human nature. (Al-Miwesh 35)
4. Nostalgia for home is the central theme.
5. Identification with nature and humanity at large is also a central theme.
6. The poets celebrate pain and suffering.
7. The poetry is full of binary opposition: day and night, east and west, beauty and ugliness and so on.
8. There is ambiguity. Some poems look like enigmas. (Al-Miwesh 35)

The free form of verse was much different from the methods of traditional Arabic poetry that depended much on fixed rhythm and meters. An example of this free verse, short rhythm, and simple diction can be seen in the poems of Elia Abu Madi who only wrote in Arabic and was considered the cream of the New York Pen League.<sup>37</sup> In his poem “The Sea” he wonders about the intrinsic human temperament in relation to nature,

I asked the sea  
Do I come from you?  
Is it true  
What some say

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<sup>37</sup> Elia Abu Madi was born in 1890 in Lebanon and received his education in Cairo where he published some poems. However, the Ottoman government thought his writings were a threat and too provocative. Therefore he was forced into exile in 1912. He came to the States in 1916. He has four poetic volumes that focus on skepticism and hope. He never returned to his native country Lebanon. He published his own Arabic newspaper in America. (Orfalea and Elmusa 67)



Of you and me?  
Or is it a lie?  
The waves laughed  
And called:  
I do not know  
Sea,  
You send the clouds  
Which water land and trees.  
We are you  
And said  
We are fruit.  
We drank of you  
And said  
We drank the rain.  
Is this true or false?  
I don't know. (77-78)

Other times Abu Madi uses the same simplicity of diction and style to reflect on ambiguous themes that would appear to be an enigma that can not be solved or explained, especially when it came to the issue of human existence. This is apparent in his poem "Riddles" which from the title one can anticipate some kind of elusiveness,

Old or new  
Is this existence?  
Am I free  
Or fettered?  
Do I lead myself  
Or am I led?  
I wish I knew.

I do not.  
I was nothing  
Or was I something?  
Is there an answer  
To this riddle?  
Or must it be forever  
Unsolved?  
I do not know;  
And why I do not know  
I know not. (74-75)

Poetry was an important literary tradition for the Arabs as I have mentioned earlier. The Al-mahjar literary figures kept this tradition alive for they knew its importance in reflecting and foregrounding the various aspects and conditions of life. They attempted to perfect it so it would live up to what they were experiencing in the diaspora. An example of the poets' recognition of the importance of poetry is perceptible in Gibran Khalil Gibran's work,<sup>38</sup>

I grieve to hear the language of the spirits prattled by the tongues of the ignorant. It slays my soul to see the wine of the muses flow over the pens of the pretenders. [...]. Poetry, my dear friends, is a sacred incarnation of a smile. Poetry is a sigh that dries the tears. Poetry is a spirit who dwells in the soul, whose nourishment is the heart, whose wine is affection. Poetry that comes not in this form is a false messiah. (21)

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<sup>38</sup> Gibran Kahlil Gibran was born in 1883 in Lebanon. He came to Boston at the age of twelve. He began a career that launched a revolution in Arab letters from American shores. *The Prophet* that sold over eight million copies worldwide and has eight books that is still in print. It comes in second place in sales after the Bible in America.

In these lines Gibran, author of the famous *The Prophet*, is drawing the boundaries between what is authentic and what is not? Gibran is offering his own transcendental view of poetry by pointing out the healing powers that a true poem can achieve. This approach goes back to an idea I mentioned earlier regarding the Arab's passion for poetry. The choice of words (sacred, spirit, soul, wine, and messiah are all related to religion, especially the Christian one) and the way he orders his sentences makes it sound as a sermon that preaches poetry and its effectiveness. Such efficiency would assist this literary tradition to accompany the immigrants' experiences.

One of the early themes that can be traced in Arab-American poetry is the issue of work. Some of these poets were Khalil Gibran, Ameen Rihani, Mikhail Naimy, and Elia Abu Madi, since that was one of their major topics, it was reflected upon from various different aspects. Many of the Arab immigrants began as peddlers roaming the metropolitan and rural areas. Unfortunately, this was not what they anticipated or come to expect because according to those Protestant missionaries, who preached America to the Arabs; life in America meant financial stability, respect, and equal opportunities. The reality of America did not live up to the missionaries' depicted canvas of the United States. Most of the immigrants were denied decent jobs and salaries due to the lack of training and ended up working in restaurants and other low paying jobs.<sup>39</sup> In his poem, which was written in Arabic, "I Dreamt I was a Donkey Boy Again" Ameen Rihani,<sup>40</sup> the first American of Arab heritage to devote himself to the writing of literature, dwells in a nostalgic way on his home town and the pleasures he encountered during his work day there. He echoes his longing for the natural and primitive style of life that is in harmony with the surrounding environment: nature. Although he was not one of those Arab-working peddlers in the U.S., he reflects on their suffering and how it is much more difficult to suffer in a strange land among strange people. For him daily labor back home carried with it the joys that his hometown offered him;

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<sup>39</sup>Louis Gerson says that "native workers began to fear them [immigrants] as potential threat to their own livelihood." (7)

<sup>40</sup> Ameen Rihani is "Born in Freika, Lebanon, in 1876, he came to the United States in 1888 with his father, a raw silk manufacturer in Lebanon." (Orfalea and Elmusa 3)

I dreamt I was a donkey boy again.

Out on the Sun-swept roads of Baalbek, I tramp behind my burro, trailing my  
mulayah.

At noon I pass by a garden redolent of mystic scents and tarry awhile.

Under an orange tree, on the soft green grass, I stretch my limbs.

The daisies, the anemones, and the cyclamens are around me pressing:

The anemone buds hold out to me their precious rubies; the daisies kiss me in  
the eyes and the lips; and the cyclamens shake their powder in my hair. (5)

When reading these lines, one cannot help but notice, from the kind of imagery and metaphors that are used, that there is a wide gap between his hometown and the place he is living in: New York. Although he puts forth the image of a peddler boy behind his small donkey, the work environment is much easing and care free. This romantic and nostalgic picture of home is contrasted with the image of New York later on in the poem;

We do what we want in Nature's realm, go where we please;

No one's offended, no one ever wronged.

No sentinels hath Nature, no police.

But lo, a goblin taller than the tallest poplar, who carries me upon  
his neck to the park in the far New York. (6)

The environmental difference in the workplace, between Baalbek and New York, is highly contrasted. While Baalbek is all natural, all free, New York is all stifling with watch dogs in every corner. The transfer from Baalbek to New York does not take place with a help of a fairy or genie, but rather on a shoulder of a goblin. This is merely to emphasize the horrific shift. Not only is the transfer oppressing, it is also suffocating. Rihani later on in the poem says; "the goblin placed his hand on my mouth, and I was dumb" (7). Rihani is reflecting the stoicism of New York and how it has made him sterile on the creative level. The watchers [the police] are everywhere forcing limitations

on individual rights. He also points out the humiliation that is visited upon him. A question that comes up here is by whom? Since the comparison is between New York and Baalbek, and in Baalbek no one is degraded, that automatically means the mortification is happening in New York by Americans. The poem ends in an appeal and desire for going back home and being a donkey boy again rather than staying in New York. Rihani ends his poem by stating: “O, let me a burro-boy again; O, let me sleep among the cyclamens Of my own Land.” (6)

Reading Rihani’s poem, one can label it is belonging to the pastoral tradition flavored with a pinch of romanticism. In fact, as a poet and author, he was both a romantic and a realist. On the one hand he firmly rejected the negative aspects of society, and was a lover of both nature and simplicity; but on the other hand he did not talk of escapist solutions but rather of aims and objectives. In an essay entitled “Over Ancient Babylon” for example, he talks about the coming of modern transport to the Arab world and how some ignorant people attempt to prevent their countries from development,

Meanwhile, the doctors of the Mohammedan law, the ulema of Islam, will scan their sacred books to see if aught therein is mentioned about the railroad and the aeroplane. And if, after straining their theological faculties, they cannot find, expressed or implied, a divine sanction of these inventions, they will forthwith curse them from the pulpit. (Rihani 100)

Bushrui describes his way of thought as “an intellectual and practical stance underpinned by a vision and an intuition that kept him in firm touch with the real needs of his people” (7).<sup>41</sup> As a critic,

“He expressed the utmost contempt for linguistic scholasticism and for Romanticism in the form of woolly sentimentality. He reserved his most vitriolic attacks for the Arab neo-Classicists, and was one of the first to call for socially committed poetry. A poet, he argued, should be fully involved with the

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<sup>41</sup> He was a true champion of Arab interests both economic and political, recording his experiences in three books which became the most authoritative account of the Arabian peninsula to date, and which have never been surpassed in accuracy of interpretive vision. (Bushrui 2)

lives of those around him, as in the noble Bedouin tradition established long before the advent of Islam.” (Bushrui 4)

This standpoint of Rihani reveals that the Western cultures and its advocates like Rousseau, Levi-Strauss, Artaud, Macaulay, etc. whose, as Said phrases it, “thought is filled with discriminations such as these made between what is fitting for us and what is fitting for them, the former designated as inside, in place, common, belonging, in a word above, the latter, who are designated as outside, excluded, aberrant, inferior, in a word below” (13-14), is actually based on stereotypes, and that the non-western cultures are not merely naïve, pristine, pure and innocent but rather active, alive and involved in the various sectors of life. An example of this occurs in 1921 when Rihani published two works which demonstrated his competence as an essayist and poet in English who can compete with any other western author or poet. One of them was *The Path of Vision*, which is a collection of essays illustrating basic differences, especially in philosophy and way of life, between the East and the West and between Christianity and Islam. Its central message is a sincere appeal for each to be willing to learn from the other, and for a harmonious relationship between the two. The book contains several references to Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman, and much of it is “imbued with their transcendentalist philosophy of the unity of existence, in particular man’s oneness with nature” (Bushrui 8). Rihani asks:

What avails it to know that I am free, if I can not realize this freedom in a definite, specific existence? But can it be realized wholly by a revolt only against a hierarchy or a state? It depends upon the nature and scope of the revolt. If we are concerned in breaking the fetters that are fastened upon our bodies and souls by external agencies only, we are doomed to failure. But if we become aware of the fetters, which we, in the sub-consciousness of centuries of submission, have fastened upon the spirit within us and strive to free ourselves of them first, then we are certain to triumph. For freedom of the spirit is the cornerstone of all freedom. And this can be attained only by realizing its human limitations and recognizing its divine claim. It might be said too that freedom is to spirit what gravity is to matter. It is inherent in it and limited, yea, fettered by

it. To know and recognize this truth is to rise to the highest form of freedom.  
(44)

In this paragraph, Rihani reveals his acknowledgement of the limitations of earthly existence. It also shows us “an intellect rooted in reality, and inclining to practical solutions illumined by intuitive vision, rather than to escapism or sophistry like most of Rihani’s Arab contemporary verse-writers. One is reminded of Emerson in his *Journals*: ‘If you cannot be free, be as free as you can.’” (Bushuri 12)

Rihani’s mind, although to an extent shaped by the influences of America, France and England, was blended with something of the Arabian imagination. Rihani began to dream of the glory of his past, his Arab cultural heritage, and to find in it sustenance for his life in the present. This return to the old glories of the past was also an attempt to warn the Arabs of the dangers threatening them and the ambitions of other nations in overtaking their lands. He urged them to unite and together promote a humanitarian spirit in reforming and modernizing their societies so that the Arab people would be able to play an important role in the modern world, just like they used to in the Golden Age of the Arabs that existed between the 7<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, without sacrificing the moral and spiritual heritage which has been their mainstay for centuries. For the materialism of America is in marked contrast to the images of his heritage that had experienced in his early life, as he relates in his *Introduction to Muluk al-’Arab (Arab Kings)*, published in 1924,

As a child, I knew little about the Arabs, and what little I knew was derived from what mothers tell their children about the Bedouin in an attempt to frighten them into behaving properly (‘Shush, the Bedouin is here’). Consequently, when I arrived in America I had nothing but fear for those whose language I speak and whose blood runs in my veins. The only other culture I knew anything about was the French, and this only superficially, my information being derived from the French school I attended in Lebanon which taught me that France was the greatest nation in the world, the noblest, richest, and most advanced; the centre of civilization, beauty and light; a peacock

among nations, strutting majestically among the domestic fowls of the world's barnyard. After arriving in America, I became an admirer of the vitality of the American people, of the freedom they enjoyed in their thought, speech and deeds, but at the same time grew to fear their intense materialistic activity, their acquisitiveness. (8)

The sense of estrangement and alienation that accompanied the Arab-American immigrants was further deepened due to the impact of the American metropolis. Most of them came from smaller cities, towns and villages only to face huge high-rise buildings and factories that were scattered across America. Even this internal split was reflected in the Arab-American literature. This cultural shock is a result of the gap and inequality among nations, specifically those that are independent and economically blooming and those under occupation and economically deteriorating. In this case, the supremacy of the New World, America, manifests itself in the derogatory abuse of the new incoming immigrants. They were “face to face with results of modern civilization without having been through the process that produced it, and consequently, without having the traits and inhibitions that result thereof” (Hitti 82). The rigorous and strange life that they had to endure, especially those who became peddlers, could not have been anticipated nor would have they been able to prepare for such abuse. Elias L., an Arab immigrant, recalls some of his sufferings while trying to make a living “Sundown each day became a signal for anxiety. Would he eat, if at all? Where would he sleep? A peddlers eyes searched the countryside, as he trudged along, for haystacks, barns, empty schoolhouses, or any enclosure that could serve as shelter” (Naff 184). The Arab immigrants were not as lucky in the cities either. As I mentioned earlier the Arab-American poet Rihani drew a very dull image of New York only to confirm and project the tedious city life caused by the impact of what the Arab-American immigrants encountered. In a narrative, Rihani reflects on this cultural shock that the Arab-American went through,

In the New World, in the city of iron and heat, amidst the frightful bustle and deafening noise, where the tender are knifed and lofty yearnings are strangled; amidst the overpowering creative current, which enslaves the giants of labor; in



the shadow of the skyscraper, which substitutes electricity for sun; in the city of iron and gold, where men live by the watch and the scale, the city which tallies and weighs everything; in New York City lived one who was poor at counting, who revered neither scales nor standards. (8)

The Arab-American poets did not stop there; they began to rebuild and resurrect the dying hopes of those Arabs who immigrated to America. Their lives were full of agony and humiliation and poetry was one of the few ways to reach out to the Arab-American community and try to soothe their pains, anxieties and reflect a sense of community whose individuals –the Arab-Americans- are undergoing similar turmoil. Naimy, one of the most acclaimed writers in the Arab-American world, <sup>42</sup> in his poem “Close Your Eyes and See,” is trying to draw a better picture for what is waiting ahead and give the immigrants some hope and support,

When clouds conceal your skies,

Close your eyes;

And see the stars beyond.

If earth is wrapped with snow,

Close your eyes;

And see the flowers below.

When sickness knows no ease,

Close your eyes;

And see the cure in the disease.

And when the tomb gapes wide,

Close your eyes;

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<sup>42</sup> Mikhail Naimy was considered for the Noble prize in literature. However, to his fellow Americans, he is virtually unknown. He lived in the U.S. for 20 years where he wrote most of his poetry. He served in the U.S. army in World War I.

And see the cradle there inside. (62)

This poetic tradition that most Arab-American poets try to preserve is very unique. One cannot help but acknowledge the philosophic depth of such simple metaphors that can be appreciated by either intellectuals or illiterate people. This poetry was written for all regardless of their educational and economic status. It was aimed at creating a sense of belonging through suffering. It was meant to touch upon the issues of hopelessness, sickness and death in a strange country among strange people that share no sympathy for foreigners. This poetry goes out to the Arab-Americans who many times found themselves homeless, foodless, penniless. It goes out to those who had no “shelter and had to cuddle next to a pig in the barn for warmth”(Naff 184), and to those who had to cramp themselves by the dozens , families and singles, into worn-down rooms devoid of electricity, no window panes, heating, beds, bathrooms, or running water (Naff 207). Poems and poets like Naimy and others were what kept them going and clinging on to their dignity as human beings striving for survival and a better life.

The Arab-Americans endeavored to assert themselves as ordinary human beings just like every other American. They wanted to demonstrate that they belonged to the human race and were not aliens from Mars. The Arab-Americans fought in World War I in the American army; many were killed and many others returned to the U.S. In their writings, they tried to mirror the horror of war and the tragedy it brings onto the human race. Naimy, like many other American poets who articulated antiwar sentiments, expressed his anger, towards the attitudes of supporters of the war, in his poem “My Brother,”

Brother, if on the heels of war Western man  
celebrates his deeds,  
Consecrates the memory of the fallen  
and builds monuments for heroes,  
Do not yourself sing for the victors nor rejoice  
over those trampled by victorious wheels;

Rather kneel as I do, wounded, for the end of our dead.  
The world breathes our stench, as it did that of the dead  
Bring the spade and follow me—dig another trench  
for those still alive. (59)

This poem shows Naimy's indictment of war. Why would he support it? It was one of the reasons he left his region in the first place. Like many other human beings who wanted to live in peace, he wanted stability. The reason he went to war was because it was his duty as an American to join the army when he was called upon. He did not want to be looked upon as an alien that had no patriotism or commitment to his country America. That was one way to become American: in order to live as an American, one had to be prepared to die for America. This American idealism and patriotism was reflected in a different way by another Arab-American poet when he wrote a hymn for the American flag. Abu Madi wrote; "On its stripes escort the stars/ True shelter is under it/ Long live America, the best sanctuary/ From generation to generation!" (67).

The Arab-Americans have tried to fit in and flow with the American mainstream. Nevertheless, steady and strong blows were dealt to the Arabs and Arab-Americans when the Western allies' secret colonial and hostile plans were revealed towards the Arab countries in 1916 in the form of the Sykes-Picot treaty<sup>43</sup> and later on followed by the Balfour declaration in 1917 that was agreed upon between the European victors England and France without any strong objection from the United States.<sup>44</sup> The Arab-Americans were caught in crossfire between their ancestral identity and their new one. While one opposed what was happening, the other was supporting it, i.e. the Arab people were struggling to prevent these catastrophes while the American governments were in favor of these colonial plans. These situations would pave the way for the second wave of Arab emigration after World War II to the U.S. that would witness many tragedies, oppressions

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<sup>43</sup> Sykes-Picot Treaty was an agreement between the French and British in 1916 to divide the Arab regions into smaller countries and colonize them.

<sup>44</sup> In November 2<sup>nd</sup> Balfour declaration paved the way for the establishment of Israel when the British government gave away Palestine to the Jews.

and a literary movement associated with the ups and downs of this ethnicity and accompanied with the rise of an Arab-American political awareness of the self and the other; a political attentiveness that was barely present before World War I.

## CHAPTER THREE

### CONSTRUCTING IDENTITY THROUGH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

One's language is so much a part of one's identity that to denigrate it is to effectively deny one's human ability to communicate. (Wolfson and Manes)

This crucial feature of life is its fundamental dialogical character. We become full human agents, capable of understanding ourselves, and hence of defining our identity through our acquisition of rich human languages of expression." (Taylor 79)

Arabic, a two thousand-year-old language, is what brings Arabs together whether in the Arab lands or the diaspora. It formulates, nourishes and preserves identity. I will relate the concept of identity with literature through Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, and how the Arab American writers' insistence on writing mostly in Arabic and publishing newspapers in Arabic helped create a sense of community that replicates their communities in their native countries. The way I am intending to use Anderson's work is by showing how language and print helped construct and preserve this sense of Arab nationality and keep this ethnicity intact. Here the Arab immigrants wrote in Arabic, published newspapers in Arabic, while being in America, thus strengthening the Arab identity of the immigrants. So although the Arab immigrants were leaving their

homes to work in an American environment, they were coming back to a native one in their homes.

Anderson's theory of the imagined community was distinguished in particular by its focus on the imagined quality of the nation, an emphasis that reflected his broader concern with the emergence of a new way of experiencing community, based upon indirect rather than face-to-face social relationships (Calhoun 95-96). Anderson explained this idea of the nation in the following terms,

It is an imagined political community-and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know their fellow-members ... It is imagined as limited because it has ... finite boundaries. It is imagined as sovereign because the concept was born in an age in which an age of Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely-ordained, hierarchal dynastic realm. It is imagined as a community, because, ... the nation is conceived as deep, horizontal comradeship. (5-7)

For Anderson, the social conditions that made this national form of community 'imaginable' for the individual were the emergence of language and print. He emphasized the personal feelings of belonging to the national imagined community. In essence, he specified the individual's felt connection to their imagined communities and their nation principally after the collapse of the 'hierarchy dynastic system' which "had made the modern preoccupation with identity and recognition inevitable" (Taylor 76).<sup>45</sup> In addition to this, he exhibited a simultaneous concern with the powerful emotional bonds aroused in the individual by imagined communities. In fact, what emerged as a vital question for him was to explain the attachment that peoples feel towards their nation especially that large communities, where there can be no complete face-to-face contact among all

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<sup>45</sup> Regarding the issue of the importance of the collapse of the old hierarchal system, Taylor notes that the "collapse of social hierarchies, which used to be the basis for honor ... honor in ancient regime sense in which it is intrinsically linked to inequalities. For some to have honor in this sense, it is essential that not everyone have it" (76). Taylor shares the same opinion with Anderson when it comes to the collapse of these systems.

citizens, are imagined. Anderson also focuses on self-identity and the social consequences that can result from people imagining community; this can arouse deep attachments and hold profound emotional bonds for the people. At their most powerful, these inventions can inspire people to be ready to die for their nations. In addition to this, imagining a community may engender exclusionary practices due to the factor of them being conceived as limited. My contribution to Anderson's theory of imagined communities is that it is transformable. While Anderson talks about an imagined community within the boundaries of a geographical area where all share the same concept of nation and commitment to it, I will apply his theory to the Arab-Americans in their diaspora to show that the imagined nation or the concept of belonging to a nation/ethnicity can transverse its own imagined border into another nation's imagined one and still create a strong sense of belonging to the original native one through the very elements of language and print that Anderson based his theory on.

Ever since the early Arab immigrants settled in the United States, they established periodical publications that served as a link between their native countries and the immigrants in their current environment. The disintegration of the hierarchal system that the Arab poet immigrants were under living i.e. the Ottoman feudal system, gave them the ability to criticize that system and its supporters in the Arab countries. I need to point out here that this hierarchal system did not collapse, but it came to end only for the Arabs who immigrated because the United States was a capitalist country and the Ottoman feudal system had no authority in America to control the Arab immigrants. This life in a capitalist country where print was advanced allowed the literary figures to express their concerns and condemn the misery and injustice inflicted on the Arab people. In his poem "Eat and Drink" Abu Madi attacks those who show no concern for the suffering people back in the Arab countries,

Eat and drink, O you rich  
though the hungry fill the streets  
Dress in new silk,  
though the poor wear rags.  
Surround your palaces with men,

and surround your men with fortresses.  
You will not see the victims of hunger;  
and they will not see what you are doing. (71)

He goes on to reveal the brutality of the feudalists and those in power and how they misuse their positions,

If soldiers do not guard you—  
You the elite of the land—  
Whom are they going to guard?  
If they do not kill the villains,  
I wonder whom they are going to kill?  
Do not grieve over their death  
For they were born to perish. (72)

Abu Madi and others, now that they were out of the Ottoman's reach, did not show any reluctance in renouncing the devastation and vindictiveness caused by the Ottomans and their beneficiaries. When they attempted to criticize the system through their publications while they were still in their Arab countries, they were imprisoned or forced into exile because their writings were viewed as precarious by the Ottoman authorities. For example, after Elia Abu Madi published his first book of poems entitled *Diwan Tidkar Al-madi* (Remembrance of the Past) in Cairo in 1911, the Ottoman government thought his writings were a threat and too provocative because he was emphasizing the glorious Arab golden age when they were conquerors and not conquered; and when they were a free people and not a humiliated one. Therefore he was forced into exile in 1912.

As the number of immigrants began to grow, and as they began to spread across the country, the number of Arab-American publications began to expand. Philip Hitti writes, "a census taken in the 1920s lists 102 periodicals and papers which saw the light in the U.S.A." (91). As Hitti mentions, the largest number of periodicals were in New York due to the large number of Arab immigrants that settled there, which in turn, reveals the



eagerness of the Arabs for news and reading (93). The content of these publications varied. It ranged from social and political news from the Arabs' native countries to news about the new communities in Al-mahjar (the land where the immigrants have settled). In addition to these social and political issues, many of the publications were dedicated to literary and cultural issues. In the *Al-Funun* journal (The Arts)<sup>46</sup>, which was published by the Arab immigrant and poet Nasib Aridah,<sup>47</sup> an article titled "Catastrophe in Syria" reflected on the suffering of the Syrians as World War I erupted. It informed the Arab-Americans of the catastrophes and suffering the Arabs in Greater Syria were experiencing under the Ottoman occupation,

The main reason of the catastrophe is the war. The other factors are: first, the involvement of Turkey in a war that it was not properly prepared or militarily equipped for. Second, the drafting of all the young men, who were fit to work, in the military and leaving behind the elderly, women and children. Therefore, there was no one left to farm the land or trade. The European products seized to flow into Syria and the allies surrounded the Syrian shores and prevented ships from entering or leaving the ports. Then there was the spread of fatal diseases and famine. (448-449)

These sufferings were portrayed not only in essays but also in short stories and poems that were published in the journals. Ni'mah Al-Haj, one of the few female poets then, wrote a poem entitled "Start Supporting" on the famine that was spreading in the Greater Syria area before and during World War I. Her poem did not merely mention the famine but also attempted to incite the Arab immigrants to take action rather than being stoic spectators while their people and fellow citizens were starving and suffering. Al-Haj wrote,

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<sup>46</sup> The journal *Al-Funun* began publication April of 1913. It represents the fulfillment of its editor and publisher Nasib Aridah's dream of publishing a literary journal in Arabic devoted to the promotion of new forms of literature for the Arabic-speaking world and keep the Arab-American community in touch with the Arab world. The last issue was published in August 1918.

<sup>47</sup> Nasib Aridah was born in Hims, Syria, August 1887. He immigrated to the United States in 1905. He opened up his own business in 1912, which was named "Al-Atlantic Publishing Co." In 1916, it was renamed "Al-Funoon Publishing Co." In April of 1913, Nasib began publishing the journal *Al-Funun*. Nasib died in Brooklyn, New York on March 25th of 1946.

Our people are dying of hunger

Let us not indulge in sorrow

Guilt will kill you if you do nothing

For guilt over the past does not help

Take action and do not hesitate to help them

For their suffering is a result of our laxity (432)

These poets and literary figures looked upon this kind of incitement as a sacred duty because they regarded themselves as the voice of their oppressed native countries. Rihani in his essay “Hunger” calls upon the Arabs immigrants to donate financially to their fellow citizens, who were not fortunate to even have the food,

A small nation in a far place on Earth is suffering of hunger. And a large glorious nation has a surplus of everything. Is it not equal; is it not a sacred duty to take the surplus from it to feed the nation suffering of hunger? ... The devastated nation is ours people. The hungry people are our brothers and sisters ... The surplus we have should go to our hungry people in our country ...

Would it hurt if each Syrian [in America] donated one dollar to aid their fellow citizens in their native country [Greater Syria]. (412-413)

In another short prose piece entitled “The Sigh of a Hopeless,” which was also published in Al-Funun journal, the author revealed an emotional outburst in describing the agony of his country,

In the silent night I heard in my ears the echo of the hammer slamming the nails into the Cross. I wept as I stared at the “pandemonium” from far away.

I saw Syria being led to the to the Cross naked, humiliated, whipped with mockery, crowned with thorns of disgrace and sipping from the pains of

death. (441)

These portrayals of the agonies that the people in the native Arab countries were suffering of could not have been accessible for the Arab-Americans if not for the various Arabic journals and papers that were published in America.

During Rihani's lifetime, the literary life of the Arab Americans gained in strength. The first Arabic language newspaper, *Kawkab Amerika* (Star of America),<sup>48</sup> was founded in 1892; by 1919, 70,000 immigrants supported nine Arabic-language newspapers, many of them dailies, including the popular *El-Hoda* (Guidance)<sup>49</sup> in 1898 (Hitti 120).<sup>50</sup> But the most important publication of this time in terms of the literary evolution of Arab Americans was a journal, *Syrian World*. Here the most distinguished writers of the early 20th century published plays, poems, stories and articles. The most important of all was Gibran Khalil Gibran, who eventually turned out to be a widely popular author among American readers.

Nevertheless, some of the early Arab immigrants did try to acculturate and assimilate into a customary milieu that was mostly structured in accordance with the White American ideologies and attempted to “distance themselves from those elements of Arab culture viewed as particularly foreign and less readily assimilable” (Majaj 328). They would associate themselves with Christianity and they would use the term the ‘Holy Land’ instead of the Arab land. They did so to engage the American readers and familiarize the ‘exotic’, while at the same time seeking to distance themselves from Islam” (Majaj 328). One of these Arab-Americans was Reverend Abraham Rihbany. In his autobiography *A Far Journey*, published in 1914, he emphasized his Christian identity and the duty of the Syrian Christian to export the spirituality of the Holy Land to the

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<sup>48</sup>*Kawkab America* (Star of America) was a weekly founded by Dr Yusef Arbeely's two sons, Ibrahim and Najib. This family was the first Arab-speaking family to enter the United States according to Hitti.

<sup>49</sup> *Al-huda* (Guidance) was established by the Mokarzel brothers, Nahum and Salloum. It was twice a week then increased to five times. (Hitti 93)

<sup>50</sup>Other publications are: *Al-Ayam* (Days) in 1897, *Mir'at Al-Gharb* (Mirror of the West) in 1899, *Al-Bayan* (Declaration) in 1910, *Al-Sayeh* (traveler) in 1910, *Al-mahuhajer* (immigrant), *Al-jami'a* (League), *Al-funun* (Arts) (Naff 319-324).

West, “the oriental must never cease to teach his Occidental brother, nor ever allow himself to forget his own great spiritual maxims which have guided the course of his life for so many centuries” (301). Not only did he make his association with Christianity precise, he also thoroughly distanced himself from Islam, constructing an image that fits the typical American stereotype of Muslims, “I was not to gaze curiously at the Mohammedans, whom I knew by their white turbans. They considered us kuffar (infidels) and enemies of the faith; therefore, they were ever ready for the slightest provocation to beat or even kill us” (81). He even calls the Muslims ‘Mohammedans’ because that was one of the terms used to describe Muslims in America. Such authors realized that “American continued to mean Christian, European, western and white” (Majaj 329). Some went to the extent of denouncing the need for the usage of Arabic language in America because they considered the West to be the power that gave the world its civilization; therefore, it is necessary to adopt the language of the civilized rather than those of the defeated and occupied. George Bowab challenged Noam Mokarzel, editor of the Al-Huda journal, who stated in one of his articles that it was “a criminal negligence” not to teach and strengthen the use of the Arabic language among the Arab-Americans; Bowab’s response was “I personally think that it will behoove every father and mother to concentrate on making their children better fitted with English, than to waste their efforts on a language whose only literature is myths, dream stories, and fables” (3). Charles Taylor explains such a stance as a result of the society’s “project [ion] of a demeaning image of them, which some of them have been unable to resist adopting. Their own self-depreciation, in this view, becomes one of the most potent instruments of their own oppression” (75). However, the majority of Arab-American intellectuals felt the need to create some kind of Arab-Arab awareness in the U.S.

On April 20, 1920, Gibran, with ten other Arab-American authors,<sup>51</sup> established Al-Rabitah Al-Qalamiyah (The Pen League)<sup>52</sup>. The aim of this group was to create a new

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<sup>51</sup> Some of the authors were; Rihani, Naimy, and Abu Madi, who were all important literary figures here and back in their native countries, who were the major figures in this period, and frequently are credited with developing an interest in immigrant writing in general.

literary tradition that would both lift the already existing Arabic literature from its quagmire and stagnation of imitation by introducing new forms of poetry like free verse and prose poetry, for the classical Arabic poetry depended mostly on monorhyme.<sup>53</sup> They intended to transfer it from merely being contemplative, abstract, and metaphysical to a worldlier, down-to-earth approach, preoccupied with daily life and personal experiences. They wanted to take poetry into the 20<sup>th</sup> century with a new active, creative force that would strengthen Arab-American solidarity, bring recognition to the Arab-American community and Arab literary traditions through print and newspapers.

These newspapers and periodicals testify to the fact that Arab immigrants never gave up their language completely, nor did they give way for the use of the American language in these publications. In fact the majority of Arab immigrants emphasized the use of Arabic, especially the standard/classical one (Al-fusha).<sup>54</sup> The immigrants even emphasized the importance of teaching Arabic to their children who were born in the United States (Hitti 100-101). These kinds of practices helped create a sense of community by providing news from home, such as the brutalities of the Ottoman occupation and later on its collapse. It also provided news about their lives in this new country, such as “guiding the adjustments of new Arab immigrants in editorials” (Naff 321). This persistence on the use of the Arabic language in an English-speaking country reveals how conscientious these immigrants were, especially the authors and poets. They were mindful about the importance of language in maintaining a sense of unity and developing a consciousness of group integrity and identity. The emphasis on language is not an arbitrary one because language itself is not an arbitrary system; it is a defining one. Anderson points out that language is what brings a community together: “written Arabic functioned ... to create a community out of signs, not sounds” (13). Although the Arab immigrants were from different regions of the Arab world (Africa, Middle East, Arabian Peninsula), they either had the sufficient knowledge or spoke the same classical/fusha

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<sup>52</sup> The Pen League helped to free Arab writers later on of their self-consciousness and addressing topics other than the immigrant experience.

<sup>53</sup>The classical Arabic poetry required that each line ends with the same sound i.e. monorhyme.

<sup>54</sup>Al-fusha is the Arabic word for classical or standard Arabic which is used all over the Arab world.

Arab language.<sup>55</sup> Now that they were in America, using the Arabic language not only keeps the umbilical connection with their native homes strong, but also with each other. This ethnic consciousness was strengthened through the usage of the classical Arabic in print. They were able of “comprehending one another via print and paper. In the process, they gradually became aware of the hundreds of thousands, [ ], of the people in their language-field ... These fellow-readers, to whom they were connected through print, formed, in their secular, visible invisibility, the embryo of the [ ] imagined community ” (Anderson 44).

These Arab-Americans were living all across America: New York, Detroit, Boston, Chicago, Cleveland, Philadelphia, San Francisco, etc. (Hitti 67). The possibility of all of them physically meeting in order for them to materialize and concretize their sense of belonging and converse is impossible. Yet, this sense of community was established through print and written Arabic. Anderson manifests this point when he wrote that nations are imagined political communities, imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. They are imagined because most of their members will never meet each other, "yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (6). However, the notion of belonging to an Arab ethnicity would not have occurred if the elites Arab-American, such as, the members of the Pen League, had not decided which of the existing forms of the Arabic language would be used as the languages of literacy (and therefore of education and communication among the Arab-Americans), "Thus English elbowed Gaelic out of Ireland, French pushed aside Breton, and Castilian marginalized Catalan" (p. 78) and the classical/fusha Arabic was established as the form instead of the other vernacular ones like the Moroccan, Syrian, Egyptian, Sudanese, Saudi, etc. Although, these vernacular dialects used the same Arabic alphabet in their informal and formal spelling, the difference is in the informal written form because then they spell the words as they pronounce them unlike the formal form in which they follow the classical/fusha spelling of the word that can be read and understood among Arabs from different regions.

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<sup>55</sup>They Immigrants had different Arabic dialects but the classical Arabic was one.

Now that the form of communication was agreed upon, it had to be stabilized. For this objective, using the classical/fusha Arabic in the journals, magazines and other publications was to maintain the stabilization of the Arabic language. Since the Arab immigrants were in an English-speaking country, and they were required to use the American language in their work places and with other non-Arabs, the Arabic language was threatened by being changed, becoming less frequent or being annihilated. Furthermore, if language was to change so rapidly, it would create fusion and interrupt communication among the scattered Arab immigrants in America. A good example of this is when the Arab-American newspapers were publishing columns for new Arab immigrants on how to adapt and what to do in America.; this would not have been possible if the form of the Arabic language spoken by the early Arab immigrants had altered from the form of the Arab language spoken by the new arriving Arab immigrants. In addition to this, with the consistency of the classical/fusha Arabic, the Arab-American generations would not be able to access their ancestral heritage because it would be written in a completely vague language. The continuity of language was necessary for the continuity of the sense of community and belonging. So, “print [] gave a new fixity to language, which in the long run helped to build that image of antiquity so central to the subjective idea of the nation” (Anderson 44) Through the printing and circulation of these Arabic publications, a wide range of people were able to recognize themselves as belonging to one community, i.e. the Arab immigrants recognized themselves as belonging to one ethnicity.

Anderson’s theory on language and identity has been challenged, especially when his analysis seems to assume that languages are fixed and stable entities that therefore represent more-or-less fixed and stable communities or nations. Michael Billing<sup>56</sup> argues that languages are not self-evident, natural facts. Languages are not permanent; instead, the concept of a permanent language may be invented, developed through the imagining of the nation-state. If this is the case, then language does not create nationalism, so much as nationalism creates language; or rather, nationalist ideology creates a view that there are distinct languages (8-9). Nevertheless, although Billing’s debate might be applicable

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<sup>56</sup> Billing in his book *Banal Nationalism* suggests that nationalism is more than just a set of ideas expressed of separatists. Instead, Billing argues that nationalism is omnipresent - often unexpressed, but always ready to be mobilized in the wake of catalytic events.

to Europe like the case in the United Kingdom where Scotland, Ireland and Wales existed before the English language, this cannot apply to the Arab-American ethnicity. The Arab immigrants prior to their departure to America were previously using the classical/fusha Arabic. Therefore the Arabic language did proceed in existence to the establishment of the Arab-American ethnicity. It is a major factor in maintaining their identity as an assembly.

Another kind of criticism towards Anderson's theory was a postmodernist one. The semiotic or postmodernist approach to nationalism assumes the nation to be a discursive entity articulated and created by narrativity. As Homi Bhabha writes, "The nation's 'coming into being' as a system of cultural signification, as the representation of social *life* rather than the discipline of social *polity*, emphasizes th[e] instability of knowledge . . . . The emergence of the political 'rationality' of the nation as a form of narrative--textual strategies, metaphoric displacements, sub-texts and figurative strategems--has its own history" (1-2). Scholars working in this tradition focus on the 'narrative constituents' of nationalism, the textual structures, tropes, and forms of different nationalist narratives.<sup>57</sup> Nonetheless, in order for any narrative to be composed it needs a form of language that is agreed upon by a certain group in a certain place. If it were to be written in some vague and foreign language, then the scope that it could reach would be very limited. In addition to the facet of language, there is the factor of print. Narratives are written to be distributed and that can only be made possible through print. Both language and print are highlighted in Anderson's theory. I do agree that narration does play a vital role in creating a national consciousness. In fact the approach to the concept of nation or ethnicity through narration is again apparent in the literature of the Arab immigrants.

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<sup>57</sup> Recent scholarly works have disaggregated nationalism. Concepts such as a nationalist "psyche" or "mind" have been dismissed as essentialist reifications that distort the complexities of history. Quite different causal tracks underlying the emergence and spread of specific nationalisms have been delineated; the presence of numerous and shifting bases for individual nationalisms have been identified. The pretensions of nationalists themselves to speak on behalf of the nation are no longer taken at face value, as such factors as ethnicity, regional loyalty, class, gender, religion and subculture are acknowledged to have produced competing and sometimes drastically different concepts of nationalism within the body of a single "nation." Contingency, multiplicity, and fluidity are the principles underlying contemporary scholarship on nationalism. (Gershoni and Jankowski 3)



The literature of the Arab immigrants whether it was poetry, novels, plays, or even articles mirrored the Arab ethnicity by representing a homogenous idea of this ethnicity at a certain time and in a certain place. The same thing applies to the effect of newspapers due to their mass production and circulation among the Arabs. If these papers were dealing with arbitrary topics then their circulation would have been very limited. As I mentioned earlier on, the literature and articles in these journals dealt with the news from the Arab world and the Arabs' status in the diaspora. The topics tended to express a down-to-earth attitude in which the sufferings, conditions and situations of the immigrants in Al-mahjar were reflected. For example Rihani tackles in *The Book of Khalid* the poor conditions of the Arab immigrants which reflects the status of many of them,

And Khalid's motto was, "One book at a time". He would not overload himself with books any more than he would with shoes. But that the mind might not go barefoot, he always bought a new book before destroying the one in hand.

Destroying? Yes; for after reading or studying a book, he warms his hands upon its flames, or makes it serve to cook a pot of lentils-with-rice. In this extraordinary and outrageous manner, barbarously capricious, he would baptize the ideal in the fire of the real. (44)

Now this Arab-American literature became an identifying tool. It referred to a culture: the Arabic culture, and preserved identity of the Arabs as an ethnic group living in America, because the "quest for self-definition is intimately bound up with culture, and culture and language are like hand and glove" (Nielson 15). Culture and language are what the Arab literary figures were using in their works to preserve identity in the diaspora. This identity is "conceived [ ] as a bond: as the affinity and affiliation that associates those so identified, that extends to them a common sense or space of unified sameness. It is a tie that holds members of the collective together." (Goldberg 12)

This drive for a unity within the Arab-American ethnicity is not merely a natural and spontaneous thing. It is necessary for their the preservation of the identity in the diaspora and for the continuous association with their ancestral heritage in the Arab world, although some might claim the opposite because,

It is the natural drive to survive for human beings to choose kin over nonkin. In choosing kin, one is choosing those of the same kind. From this natural selectivity follows a commitment to homogeneity. It is in our makeup, so to speak, if it is not straightforwardly in our genes. (Goldberg 21)

It is natural to communicate in Arabic when the immigrants meet, and it is natural to exchange experiences in social gatherings. As Taylor argues, one's identity does not come from isolation but through negotiating it through dialogue "partly over, partly internal, with others ... identity depends on dialogical [] relations with others" (80). Nevertheless, what the Arab immigrants were doing exceeded that. They were communicating in Arabic across America through newspapers and magazines and they were reflecting on turmoil and conditions through a unified standard classical Arabic knowing that it would overcome the various dialects that the Arab immigrants spoke.<sup>58</sup>

These practices by the Arab immigrants to create this sense of belonging to an ethnicity were both voluntary and imposed simultaneously. It was imposed because the Arab-American immigrants were struggling to maintain the religions of their ancestors in a country that appeared to them materialistic and acquisitive. Although nearly the majority of the Early Arab immigrants were Christian, they were not defined as Arabs by the American government. During a census in 1924 in which the American government did not count the Arab Christians as Arabs, Philip K. Hitti had to write a plea to the American government asking for the recognition of the Christian immigrants as Arabs because of their unique and particular history and civilization (5). Those who were being denied their historical ancestry just because they were Christians were subjected to this identity crisis following stereotypes: all Arab are Muslims and all Muslims are Arabs, no Christian can be an Arab. Even the Muslim Arab community did not enjoy the luxury of practicing their religion openly because there were no mosques. The first mosque was not built until 1919.<sup>59</sup> The facet of religion gains its importance due to its collectiveness, i.e. "the longer a group remained without its church, the more difficult it was to maintain group cohesion and impose moral standards of its own" (Naff 293). These Churches have

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<sup>58</sup> Although all the Arabs speak Arabic, the colloquial Arabic was spoken in various dialects across the Arab world, unlike the classical Arabic which had one form.

<sup>59</sup> It was built in Highland Park, Michigan. However, later on, it was turned into a church. (Elkholy 25)

used the Arabic language in their worships and have identified themselves as historically part of the Arab world, although they were located in the United States. The Arabs-Americans' connotation of being a Christian is being an Arab because to them "Church affiliation was a matter of birth and tradition and not merely conviction and belief" (Hitti 104). Reverend Rihbany, who I mentioned earlier on in the chapter, thematized this fact in his autobiography: "we Christians of Syria and all the Arabic-speaking countries, although of various origins, have always loved to call ourselves Arabs" (243). Not only were the Arab-Americans being denied their original ethnicity but also Arabs were often considered as 'colored' regardless of the country of origin. Those who had earned American citizenship had difficulties in voting rights.<sup>60</sup> This denial of identity, which is "partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by misrecognition of others" (Taylor 75), forced the Arabs to attempt to try and make their ethnic identity recognized even if it were only among the Arab immigrants, in other words,

It had to do with the constitution of some defensive collective identity against the practices of racist society. It had to do with the fact that the people were being blocked out and refused an identity and identification within the majority nation, having to find some other roots on which to stand. (Hall 52)

The racist practices of the dominant identity and culture towards the Arab-Americans created a kind of frustration in which the Arab immigrants felt threatened to lose their heritage identity and in return not becoming part of the dominant one. So the early Arab-American intellectuals had to think of this conflict of identity "not in the wake of [its] disappearance but in the wake of [its] erosion, of [its] fading, of [its] not having the kind of purchase and comprehensive explanatory power it had before" (Hall 4). The Arab immigrants' identity manifested power in their native countries because it had a history; it had a culture and most of all it occupied a space. These three conditions were not available for the survival and development of an Arab or an Arab-American identity in the American Diaspora because the Arab culture was completely vague for the American people. As William E. Leuchtenburg, an American historian, remarked, "from

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<sup>60</sup>As I have mentioned earlier on a candidate for a local office in Birmingham in the 1920s passed out handbills that read "They have disqualified the Negro, an American citizen from voting in the white primary. The Greek and the Syrian should also be disqualified. I DON'T WANT THEIR VOTES. If I can't be elected by white men, I don't want the office" (Dehmer 38-39).

the perspective of the American historian, the most striking aspect of the relationship between Arab and American cultures is, to Americans, the Arabs are a people who lived outside of history” (15). This point of view is also expressed by an acclaimed literary figure, Salman Rushdie, who in his *Satanic Verses* says, “The Arabs, like the sand dunes of their deserts, are without roots” (94). Simultaneously, culture refers back to history because culture is not an arbitrary thing that is created out of a vacuum. It is based on a systematic progress that allows it to flourish or diminish through the passage of time. So if the native culture of the Arab immigrants was not recognized or appreciated by the host culture, then the history of the immigrants is also abrogated and annihilated by the host culture that puts forth its own history and ideologies as an example to be followed and appropriated by the newcomers. As for the space, in addition to the restriction they faced like voting, although they had the legal citizenship, there was the issue of negative stereotyping of Arabs, and consequently Arab immigrants/Arab-Americans. Since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, western authors and media have been including negative images of Arabs in their books, reports and movies. This tradition goes on today in both Europe and America. What kinds of image are projected on Arabs and their descendants? Some of the stereotypes are: all Arabs are Muslims, and all Muslims are Arabs, Arabs are camel jockeys, towel heads, sand niggers, Muslim fundamentalists, militants, terrorists, women oppressors, sheiks, lavish and wasteful spenders, dirty, unshaven, and uneducated. Arab women are stereotyped as oppressed, scantily clad belly dancers, sensuous, beautiful women in love with Western heroes who rescue them from the evil Arab men. Or they are depicted as confined to home, wearing veils, long robes, faceless, characterless, passive, and uneducated. Is there a good stereotype of Arabs? As long as they are minor in characteristics, passive, culturally Western, and subordinate to western policies then they might have a chance of being labeled as good.<sup>61</sup> These negative stereotypes create an unhealthy environment for unequal recognition which “inflicts damage on those who are denied it ... the projection of an inferior or demeaning image

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<sup>61</sup> Some of the movies in which presented Arabs in negative forms: *The Adventure of Tarzan* (1921), *The Adventures of Prince Ahmad* (1925), *Aladdin from Broadway* (1917), *All Aboard* (1926), *The Arab* (1915), *Cleopatra* (1912). There are over than 900 movies since 1908 that have negative images of Arabs. For further readings, I suggest Jack Shaheen’s *Real Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*.

on another can actually distort and oppress, to an extent that the image is internalized.”  
(Taylor 81)

The focus of the literary Arab-American literary figures on using the classical/fusha Arabic in their literatures and to print their articles came as attempt to regain identity and territory, something that they had lost since they left their native countries just like the rest of the Arab immigrants,

In this course the search for roots, one discovered not only where one came from, one began to speak the language of that which is home in the genuine sense, that other crucial moment which is the recovery of lost histories. The histories that have never been told about [themselves] that [they] could not learn in schools, that were not in any books, and that [they] had to recover. (Hall 52)

Language, as Renan says, “Invites people to unite ... It encloses one in a specific culture (16-17). The Arab-Americans valued the significance of language and its implication and that is why they used one form of Arabic to communicate, report and document. They wanted to achieve that sense of unity in the diaspora within the boundaries of their ethnic group. They sought after a haven from the oppressions of the dominant culture and its language that was forcing them to go astray from their heritage, traditions, customs and language. “True to Arab tradition, [ ] poets within the Arab American community write with passion and commitment about identity, culture and life, and represent many styles and voices” (Abi nadir 3).

In consequence, the Arab-Americans’ quest for identity between 1870 and 1940 has demonstrated my argument and contribution to Anderson’s theory that the imagined community and identity can be strengthened, even if in the diaspora through the means of language and print and vice versa; language and print reinforce and fortify identity and the sense of belonging to an ethnicity.

## CONCLUSION

### SHAPING IDENTITY AND CULTURE

I am the East,  
I am the corner stone  
Of the first temple of God  
And the first throne of Humanity...  
I am the East,  
I possess philosophies and creeds  
So who would exchange them with me for technology. (Ameen Rihani)

Throughout this whole study, I have managed to spot light an ethnicity and its literature, a people striving for the recognition of their identity in a period of American history that appeared to have scarcely cited them. The experience of the early Arab immigrants that span from 1871 up to 1940 was shadowed with much turmoil and agony, yet they managed to tolerate the deteriorating conditions and sustain connection with one another as individuals and as a group.

The commencing of the Protestant missionaries in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the Arab countries precipitated in the introduction of the American culture to the Arabs whose own culture had been stagnant due to the seriously negative influences of the Ottoman occupation. Therefore, the Arabs had an opportunity of learning about another culture that enjoyed freedom and progress. The constituents of the American culture portrayed by the Protestant missionaries in combination with the Arabs' degenerating economic, social, educational and political conditions appealed to the Arabs as a scheme for immigration. The major objective of their immigration was to escape the Ottoman

brutality and acquire a decent economic status that would allow them to return to their families and provide a sufficient and adequate living for them.

However, the early Arab immigrants, upon arrival to America, encountered a different environment than of that advocated to them by the Protestant missionaries. The physical description of the cities and town was precise, large cities, huge building, congested metropolitans, electricity, railroads, etc, but the promise of decent well paid jobs and respect were absent from the real life they encountered. Life in America was tough and humiliating at times. The immigrants lived in poor colonies with inadequate accommodations. Financially they had barely enough to provide food and shelter, so there was no possibility of purchasing a ticket and returning back home after realizing that image depicted by the missionaries was different from the reality experienced. As a result, they had to accept poor paying jobs. These miserable situations did not go unnoticed. The Arab-American poets embarked on a mission of recording these miseries in their poems and at times attempted to offer some form of encouragement to the early Arab-Americans. The early Arab-American literature reflected on the various conditions of the Arab-Americans, translated their sufferings into words and published them in the Arab-American newspapers so the rest of the Arab-Americans in their diaspora would realize that many of them were experiencing the comparable hardships, and aiming at informing the Arabs back home of the Arab-Americans rigorous lives and asperities.

These publications, however, although circulating mostly in the United States, were all composed in the Arabic language. To be more precise, since there various vernacular Arab dialects, the Arabic language employed was the classical/fusha one. The intention of using such a unified form was to create a sense of community among all the Arab-American across the United States regardless of the colloquial dialects they spoke. Not only was it easier to communicate among them, especially those who descended from the various geographical locations of the Arab world, but as Anderson theory observes, language and print are necessary components for the creation of a sense of identity and belonging to a larger body and entity. In addition to this, as I have established in this study, the availability, accessibility and deployment of these two elements (language and print) among the Arab-Americans resulted in a community that shares equal commitment

to their identity and ethnicity, thus preserving the umbilical cord that connects them with their ancestry heritage, which, in turn, aids them to distinguish and recognize themselves as individuals in both the ‘intimate sphere’ and the ‘public one,’ but mostly this self recognition was achieved through splitting; “Splitting between that which one is, and which one is the other” (Hall 48) because,

Arab identity formation often takes place outside the American mainstream. In these marginal locations, Arab immigrants from various national and village “homes” construct identities that flow constantly across the globe ... They [ ] participate in ... agendas in the Middle East. Arab American ... concerns ... are noticeably absent from the larger American arts scene, whether multiethnic or mainstream, popular or elite. (Howell 62)



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