DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

Cultural Memory and Identity Politics in Arab-American Women’s Narratives

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TIMIȘOARA

2019
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Abstract

As is the case with other ethnic literatures in the United States, Arab-American literature has been part of the U.S. literary scene for over a century, ever since the original Arab immigrants, known as Mahjar (émigré), began to settle in America, in the 1910s. However, a significant Arab-American literary revival has taken place in the last few decades, particularly among the Arab-American novels that have re-emerged since the early 1990s, but have been proliferated significantly after the events of 11th September, 2001. The Arab novel in English has emerged from a transnational context and transcultural collaborative endeavors, having had its beginnings in East-West intellectual and cross-cultural encounters and exchanges, and having experienced a process of adaptation and translation from the era of the crusades, through the European Renaissance and, subsequently, the age of discovery, with its resultant colonization and cultural imperialism, eventually reaching the complex 9/11 discourse.

This has consequently led to the unfolding of a history of adjustment by migrants from the Arab world, who experimented with the Western forms they encountered in their respective host countries. Thus, as a product of a culture that was borne away from its homeland, Arab-American literature is captured by the same question as ‘diasporic’, ‘hybrid’, and ‘exilic’, while the authors’ voices could easily be accommodated under labels such as ‘immigrant’, ‘ethnic’, and ‘postcolonial’. Beginning with its very title, this dissertation has set out to focus on Arab-American women’s writings. It is, therefore, appropriate for this research to establish a dialogue by tracing women’s history and showing how Arab-American women’s voices became evident in the United States in the late 19th century as well as after. As a result, any discussion of how women’s writings and performance were represented in Arab-American literature clearly depicts women as influencing and being influenced by, on the one hand, the great shifts in American politics, culture, and community towards Arab-Americans and, on the other, the emergence of other ethnic literatures.

Arab and Arab-American women writers appear to more directly address the derogatory stereotypes regarding Arabs, and have been vigorously responding in their literary works to such negative perceptions towards Arabs and Muslims in the United States. The themes of inherited memories of original homelands and reconfigurations of belonging lie, essentially, at the core of contemporary Arab-American women’s literature. Reductionist stereotypes and manifest
prejudice are also prominent subjects in their texts, particularly in the post-9/11 era. Moreover, they not only depict the reality, but try to create a counter-discourse as a means of resistance. In this sense, their dealing with cultural codes is one of the themes that are worthy of consideration, because, culturally speaking, Arab and Muslim women have been seen as oppressed and silenced, or exotic Other, a perception that must be changed. On the other hand, wherever they have lived, Arabs have inhabited the confusing status of ‘foreigners insiders’ or ‘unwanted citizens’, which has promoted a separation of the Arabs from the majority group and has made them visible as ‘alien’.

In the process, these Arab-American women writers fictionalize their visibility, which may involve an engagement with cultural tradition, on the one hand, and with mutable racial logic within mainstream contexts, on the other. Essential for an understanding of this engagement are identity politics and cultural memory, two notions which, I hope to demonstrate, will build a discourse designed to break down the very idea of categorizing Arabs as ‘others’. Both concepts provide a distinct set of views that allow a study of how mutual racial logic has been shaped, as well as how a reconfiguration of identity might be achieved.

The three chosen works, namely Diana Abu-Jaber’s *Crescent* (2003), Laila Lalami’s *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* (2005), and Mohja Kahf’s *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006), contribute to the field of Ethnic Studies in the sense of works by and about Arab Americans experiments. My selection of narratives has been guided by a desire to discuss the chosen texts in sufficient depth, since my intention is not to offer a comprehensive historical survey or to present an exhaustive commentary on representations of ‘Arabness’ in Arab-American fiction. What I do provide, rather, is a mode of reading invited by the studied texts, as they work toward establishing patterns of interaction between, on the one hand, various Arab-American authors, and, on the other hand, text and context.

These narratives have been very rarely discussed together in terms of an analysis of three distinct concepts: ‘Al-Andalus’, ‘the Veil’, and ‘the Body’. One gap I have aimed to fill in this research relates to how the year 1492 marks both a point of rupture and one of departure; “a rupture with the Moorish Andalusian presence in the Iberian Peninsula, and a departure to the New World” (Gana 2008:282). In other words, one of my intentions is to focus on Andalusia as a symbolic topos in Arab-American narrative fiction by women writers. In addition, this step in my analysis prompts me to open another argument, as to how both ‘the veil’ and ‘the body’ become

This study, thus, engages in a close reading and examination of the narrative and of the rhetorical and formal devices and techniques whereby Arab-American writers cross the less-than-clearly-distinct border between cultural translation and transculturation, thereby transforming the novel into a performative space of competing affiliations and affinities, a space in which identities can no longer be fixed to monolithic grand narratives. My aim is to develop a comparative approach to these works, which inherently possess a dual literary nationality. Such an approach requires familiarity with both the literary and the cultural traditions on which each individual work draws. Besides the Arab and the American literary traditions, the texts may also draw on Spanish and, particularly, Andalusian, i.e. hybrid, traditions. The research resorts to various tools of post-colonial and diaspora cultural studies, which have a special interest in theorizing the ‘new’ phenomena of borders and ethnic borderlands, hybridity, double consciousness and cosmopolitanism.

Another purpose of this study is to shed light on the historical framework, so as to offer the reader a better understanding of the peculiar development of the Arab-American novel. This necessarily requires a close reading of these particular novels, attending to the diverse diasporic and geopolitical contexts from which each one is produced, as well as to the socio-political urgencies they seek to address.

The first chapter of this thesis is devoted to a historical contextualization of the Arab uprooting and dispersion into the diaspora, particularly in the United States. The chapter also, however, sets out to provide a historical background, including a look at the emergence of the term ‘Arab’, while tracing back the Arab presence in the United States and how Arabs have been de-Americanizing, particularly in the post-9/11 era, as well as shedding light on the proliferation of Arab-American literature. The second chapter includes a rereading of the Andalusian chronotope in contemporary Arab-American women’s writings, showing how the legacy of Al-Andalus has many different dimensions and has been characterized by the multi-directionality of memory, which provides valuable discourses through the lens of which the concept of cultural memory may be examined. This chapter sets out to scrutinize unexplored facets among the three selected novels, by examining aspects of cultural memory and identity politics that might be
included within the trope of Al-Andalus. The aim is to show how the trope of Al-Andalus is perceived differently from text to text, according to whatever meanings the authors intend to impose and by looking at how each author connects her characters’ identities and realities with the Al-Andalus legacy.

The next two chapters provide a comparative perspective via discussions about the significance and value of ‘the veil’ and ‘the body’ in relation to gender identity negotiations among Arab and Muslim women. This discussion is meant to contextualize, from historical, political, cultural and sociological points of view, the three novels discussed in the last two chapters. The third chapter discusses the concept of the veil, which occupies a vitally-important space in the debate on feminist studies, given its critical role in questioning Arab and Muslim women’s identity, not only in Arab and Muslim countries, but also across the diaspora. What I am proposing here, consequently, is an interdisciplinary study that focuses on the relationship between the veil and Arab and Muslim women’s identity as key factors, involving – introspectively – Islamic feminist, third-world feminist, and Western feminist perspectives in analyzing representations of the veil. Chapter four explores how the three writers seek to re-conceptualize ‘the body’ as a literary strategy for reconstructing subjectivity or gender identity. ‘Mind over Body’ is what the Arab-American women writers seek to achieve when they address, through their literary texts, the Eastern and Western male mentalities, as well as hegemonic liberal U.S. feminism. These writers call for a readjustment of the diverse elements that strongly force the fixation and stereotyping to continue.

Towards the end, the paper closes with a conclusive chapter which brings together the final conclusions. In this respect, I aim to present how each of these three writers attempts to reveal some sets of spaces that are constructed around their female characters, pointing certain modes of culture and differential consciousness towards these spaces, as well as what type of readers these literary texts address.

It is in an atmosphere of power and powerlessness that Arab-American women’s writings exist. The knowledge that, ultimately, one has no control over one’s life, and that one can be categorized and labeled via different clichés, leads to the creation of excessive vulnerability. Over the years, Arab-American women’s texts have discussed the history of (mis)representation of Arab and Muslim women, aiming to remove their stereotypical representation as domestic slaves, occupants of harems, and passive victims, images which have dominated the Western
perception of Arab women. Without the effort of giving a voice to women in a collection of stories that are meant to deconstruct such stereotypes, they would prevail. However, the literature of Arab-American women is precisely the literature of creating a voice that arises from the human need to generate a counter-narrative, as well as to breaking the invisibility by opening up a dialogue within Arab-American communities, in order to help them solidify and construct their collective identity.

From the discussion of different tropes in each novel, with the application of multiple perspectives, it is clear that Arab-American writers (in this case, Diana Abu-Jaber, Mohja Kahf and Laila Lalami) disprove the idea that writing should be confined to the scope set by predominantly male writers in order to break invisibility. Some of the prevailing rhetorical practices themselves amount to closed-minded viewpoints, and strongly reflect a general or holistic perspective that women’s writings should only concern themselves with women’s issues. This inevitably leads us to ask why women writers are expected to write exclusively about women’s identity, or why, for instance, if you are a black American author, you must write about ‘black issues’ and race.

Addressing female thoughts about gender, racial and other forms of discrimination is not, it would appear, the accepted way forward in the battle to construct subjectivity. As a result, in this research I endeavor to explore how Arab-American women writers might celebrate the memory of Al-Andalus in voicing concern for ethnic and other matters, such as creating trustworthy voices. In these writers’ minds, perhaps, telling women’s stories from the female perspective makes for an interesting debate on history, politics and culture, as opposed to being necessarily about gender. In this light, they set out to show that readers of these books should not be confined to either a female or feminist audience, but can include a male audience as well. In other words, these books are addressed to the public in general, to ‘the absolute reader’, to reveal different concerns regarding society, culture and humanity. In targeting neither the female nor the male reader exclusively, but rather an audience that transcends the whole notion of gender, it can be argued that the works of writers such as Abu-Jaber, Lalami and Kahf are the true representation of what the whole feminist argument is, (f)actually, about.