An Oriental Version of Otherness: English-Speaking Writers of the Arab Diaspora

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Abstract:
Our purpose has been to draw on the representation of otherness by selected writers of the Arab American diaspora, with a stress on two representative authors of this community: Gibran Khalil Gibran and Edward Said. Viewed from a postcolonial perspective, most of the writers considered for our analysis have written as a response to the artificial East/West dichotomy, almost defying their assumed hyphenated identity. If the African slave Omar Ibn Said first wrote in Arabic, Edward Said preferred to write his books in English, Gibran Khalil Gibran wrote both in English and Arabic, while the Egyptian writer Ahdaf Soueif – educated in England and Egypt, writes in English and Arabic. In the cultural and geographical space of the United States, the *Arab American* immigrant experience mirrors that of other ethnic groups, and it is demonstrated in their literatures.

Keywords: Arab American, Edward Said, exile, Khalil Gibran, Orientalism, otherness, postcolonial, split identity

1. Introduction: On the Arab American Diaspora

Migration means displacement and displacement leads to the need of coming to terms with a new literal and metaphorical perspective on one's "home", which in the case of the self-exiled writer acquires a new depth of meaning, a new dimension that can no longer be generalized: it becomes individual and personal, as the writer's not-so-distant past and the immediate present interact, while memory connects one's experiences of the old home—be it one's childhood home, homeland, nation, or country—with the whole burden of cultural, religious, ideological and political loyalties.

The Arab world has had its share of the growing migration process that has dislocated a large number of people from Arab countries in the Middle East and North Africa to the rest of the world. This massive migration was periodically triggered and fed by political events, such as

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the 1948 Palestinian exodus – known as *al-Nakbah* (النكبة, meaning "disaster", "catastrophe", or "cataclysm") – or the long Civil War in Lebanon, and the 2003 allied invasion of Iraq which resulted in the overthrow of Saddam Hussein and his regime, leading the country into internal inter-confessional and political struggles (see also Marfleet, 2007: 397). The statistics show that, following the Anglo-American invasion, over four million Iraqi citizens chose exile, and the situation has not improved, while almost half of the Palestinians residing in the occupied territories left their country of origin. However, Europe was not the only target country for the emigrants from the Arab countries: the oil-rich Arab Gulf nations were also favored destinations. Significant Arab migration took place between the nineteenth century and the 1930s, and was motivated by different reasons – not only economic and political but also cultural. All these emigrants left their countries of origin starting from the Victorian Age to the third decade of the following century. Elad-Bouskila closely analyzed the literature of the diaspora, and pointed out that

> Exiles or Diasporas have typified the modern era since the turn of the nineteenth, and particularly during the twentieth, centuries. This phenomenon of emigration for economic, political, and cultural reasons, of individuals as well as communities who sought to settle in other countries, is reflected in various spheres of art, including literature. (Elad-Bouskila, 2006: 41)

2. Edward Said and the question of the Other

In his scientific works, Said always makes references to his life and his origins. His imprint, very present, makes Said a transparent author, who has a clearly identifiable signature. Bayoumi and Rubin underline the very personal style of Said from the publication of his first writings:

> [...] we can immediately recognize the candid style of addressing a reader on both a personal and a political level simultaneously. Said would use this same method of narrating politics – of involving the reader in suppressed stories, hidden histories and autobiographical moments -many times over the years. (Bayoumi and Rubin, 2000: 14)

It is interesting to highlight Said's use of personal pronouns in *Orientalism* and to associate this with the way he describes himself in his text. He is sometimes Oriental and Arab (and Palestinian) and at other times American and Western. This highlights his cultural duality, his identity as a disoriented-marginal man, his position as "out of place" as described in his autobiography. It is difficult to conclude what Said himself identifies more in his work but from the start of the work he assimilates to an American by the use of the pronoun *we*, second person in the plural, as demonstrated by following excerpt:

> The Orient is an integral part of European material civilization and culture. [...] In contrast the American understanding of the Orient will seem considerably less dense, although our recent Japanese, Korean, and Indochinese adventures ought now to be creating a more sober, more realistic "Oriental" awareness. Moreover, the vastly expanded American political and economic role in the Near East (the Middle East) makes great claims on *our* understanding of that Orient. (Said, 1979: 2, emphasis added)

Later in the introduction, he identifies more with an Oriental, an Arab and a Palestinian, but this time using the pronoun Il, the third person singular. In the extracts that follow, Edward Said recognizes his cultural duality and presents the reasons that made him write *Orientalism*. In these lines, Said gives his work the tone of a story, of a personal testimony, already a beginning of *Out of Place* which he will publish twenty-two years later:

> Much of the personal investment in this study derives from my awareness of being an 'Oriental' a child growing up in two British colonies. All of my education, in those colonies (Palestine and Egypt) and in the United States, has been Western, and yet that deep early awareness has persisted. In many ways my study of *Orientalism* has been an attempt to inventory the traces upon me, the Oriental subject of the culture whose domination has been so powerful a factor in the life of all Orientals. (*Ibidem*: 25)

He continues on the reasons that made him write Orientalism by explaining that he is a Palestinian living in Western American culture where the stereotypes associated with Arabs convey a negative image of them and discriminate against them:

> My own experience of these matters are in part what made me write this book. The life of an Arab Palestinian in the West, particularly in America, is disheartening. There exists *here* an almost unanimous consensus that politically *he* does not exist, and when it is allowed that *he* does, it is either as a nuisance or as an Oriental. The web of racism, cultural stereotypes, political imperialism, dehumanizing ideology holding in the Arab or the Muslim is very strong indeed, and it is this web which every Palestinian has come to feel as his uniquely punishing destiny. It has made matters worse for *him* to remark that no person academically involved with the Near East – no Orientalist, that is – has ever in the United States culturally and politically identified *himself* wholeheartedly with the Arabs. [...] The nexus of knowledge and power creating the 'Oriental' and in a sense obliterating *him* as a human being is therefore not for me an exclusively academic matter. (*Ibidem*: 27, emphasis added)

In this excerpt, Said testifies to his own experience; the *him*, the Palestinian Arab in America, it is about him. By speaking thus, Said fills a vacuum, in my opinion. His political and intellectual commitment, through his academic writings, came to fill the void to which he refers and from which, obviously, he suffered. He became the spokesperson

for the Palestinian cause and in the process that of all Arabs, and by the gang that of peoples and cultures whose negative representation serves Western hegemony. He accomplished this by investing himself personally in his writings, by representing himself with his duality of disoriented-marginal man.

The current fascination with cultural otherness places us in a present marked in the academic and social sphere by the criticism of classical modernity and the particular characteristics that this criticism presents today (considering that this attitude is not new in the history of the modern project). I refer to the correspondence that has been established between modernity, illustration and the West, including the national State as its derivative product. In the face of this allegedly homogeneous set, this otherness that represents the existence of an outside for those who do not notice a future in the modern project, an outside in which political hopes are deposited and the possibility of a radical critique of everything that is sought to replace is usually opposed.

While the fascination with the culturally opposite is an ancient theme that has traveled through different fields of knowledge and artistic creation, today this position has taken strength to the point that it has been constituted in reference to an important part of contemporary criticism facing an audience predisposed to accept the principle of the East-West dichotomy or the existence of a diffuse, but better, non-Western world.

The concern about this issue arises from the critical review of these works in the framework of an investigation that deals with indigenous intellectuals, subjects who escape these compartments that sharply separate the indigenous from the western, but also belong to indigenous societies that at present they do not subordinate themselves to the indicated dichotomy, and that they probably never formed that pole in which they are confined because the natives are indicated as such with colonization, so that the link with the West – problematic, conflicting, but real – is an inescapable element without which it is impossible to understand their political trajectory, their cultural development and the responses they have offered to the cultural inferiorization to which they have been subjected since they were named as Indians.

For Edward Said, the problem is not the contact but the way in which it occurs, in fact, he affirmed that communication and loans in one way or another is inherent in cultures, to the point that it would be a sterile exercise discuss the ownership of this or that object (hence its discrepancy with the assertion of its own in an exclusive sense). Therefore, the conflict does not lie in cultural change, but in the type of relations that produce it, it is here that it repairs the violence of modern

imperialism in all areas: cultural, ideological, economic, social and political.

His concept of culture moved away from others that place it above human relationships, not contaminated or intervened by them (the superstructure in a classical Marxist language). Already in *Orientalism* Said links the development of culture with the vicissitudes of history, pointing out that everything that has been said about the Orientals cannot ignore the colonial fact, is more, than that collection of knowledge is part of the colonial gear. But it is in *Culture and Imperialism*, published fifteen years later, that he best articulates an idea of culture integrated into everyday social relations, interfered with by history, by the interests of different actors and their ideologies:

> Culture is a sort of theatre where various political and ideological causes engage one another. Far from being a placid realm of Apollonian gentility, culture can even be a battleground on which causes expose themselves to the light of day and contend with one another, making it apparent that, for instance, American, French, or Indian students who are taught to read *their* national classics before they read others are expected to appreciated and belong loyally, often uncritically, to their nations and traditions while denigrating or fighting against others. (Said, 1993: xiii)

Said criticized the West, but without denying the link with it and without aspiring to the end of that contact, an attitude that separates it from the dichotomy indicated in the previous section and reunites it, in a certain way, with those anti-colonialist thinkers who knew how to distinguish between Europe and Eurocentrism, between the West and colonialism.

3. The Arab American Other

America re-discovered the Arab minority on September 11, 2001, when a group of Arab extremists from the Middle East associated with Al-Qaeda managed to highjack four American airliners and to carry out suicidal attacks on different locations over the United States, including the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York City. The attackers were Arabs, and the victims were American citizens. One decade later, the events in the Middle East triggered an unprecedented refugee crisis that conferred a new dimension to the already existing clash of civilizations – the East and the West, the Orient and the Occident – hopelessly damaging the relations between the Arabic and Western (European and North American) cultures.

The literature of a country is a reflection, if not an expression, of its culture. For foreign literature to develop in a country, foreign influence must be deeply rooted in it. Furthermore, it must not be solely military or political. If this is the case, it almost inevitably leads to a rejection of the occupier's language and culture, by nationalist outburst.

We define the Arab Anglophone fiction as a postcolonial development: the fiction written by the Arab writers of the diaspora as a component and further development of postcolonial literature. It starts from demonstrating that the "postcolonial imaginary" – understood as the set of postcolonial values, institutions, laws, symbols, and discourse – eventually interfere with the readers' experiences. As stated by Abdul R. Jan Mohamed,

> Colonialist literature is divisible into two broad categories: the 'imaginary' and the 'symbolic.' […] The 'imaginary' representation of indigenous people tends to coalesce the signifier with the signified. … The writer of such texts tends to fetish a non dialectic, fixed opposition between the self and the native… Writers of symbolic texts […] are more aware of the inevitable necessity of using the native as a mediator of European desires. Grounded more firmly and securely in the egalitarian imperatives of Western societies, these authors tend to be more open to a modifying dialectic of self and Other. (Jan Mohamed, 1965: 65–66)

Regarding the Arab diasporic literature, Arab American critic Edward Said underlined the unique vision of the migrants who can easily draw a comparison between their present condition and the not so distant past: "Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, awareness that – to borrow a phrase from music – is *contrapuntal*" (Said, 2002: 186, italics in the original). Another Arab-American critic, Waïl Hassan (2014), thinks that any approach to British- and Arab-American literature should firstly consider the Orientalist framework which shapes both the production and the reception of Arab immigrants' work in the U.S. and Britain, and secondly, the translational role that Arab immigrant writers play as interpreters and mediators between their homeland and their adoptive countries. His conclusion is that the theory of minor literature, as developed by Deleuze and Guattari, should be nuanced by recourse to postcolonial and translation theory.

4. The imagined ethno-geographic borderlines

The Anglophone Egyptian novelist and political commentator Ahdaf Soueif, in her debut novel *In the Eye of the Sun* (1993), has two of the characters comment on the ambiguous racial belonging of the Egyptians:

> "It is very complicated", Frederick says again.
> "But surely Egyptians are Africans?" Asya says.
> "They're not", Saif says.
> "I thought you were supposed to be Arabs?" Leon says.
> "But how come? Egypt is in Africa, isn't it?" says Asya.

> "Yes, but you're not the same race as the – Zulus, say, or the Bantu. You are – more white. I told you it was stupid." (Soueif, 1999: 381)

It is an ambiguity which extends to those Arab writers from the Middle East who have chosen English, or French, or another language as a means of communicating heir experience to a Western readership.

The Middle East is an area whose approximate delimitation has changed according to the historical time and varied according to the uses. This appellation only appeared during the nineteenth century thanks to the increasing support of the Western states which, themselves, do not agree on what it designates. The term Middle East should logically designate a middle zone between the Near East (formerly called the Levant) and the Far East. This is what Europeans hear more or less since, for them, the Middle East extends from the Nile Valley to the Iranian plateaus – with variants including Libya and Sudan. The United States has a more extensive view since it considers that it extends from Morocco to Pakistan. Whatever territories one chooses to include, the Middle East does not have an intrinsic coherence and the single term cannot hide its diversity and its contrasts. On the borders of Africa, the Eastern Mediterranean and Asia, it is a geographical and human crossroads, a place of meetings and exchanges, a place of cultural and religious intermingling.

The division of the Middle East by the imperialist powers has completely changed the perception of this global entity whose dividing lines in no way corresponded to the European concept of national states, imported late into the region. Oppositions, cleavages and identities therefore passed through relationships other than national. One of those who matter to us is religious. If Islam is a factor of unity in the Middle East, most of the writers concerned are Christians. Religious allegiances often go hand in hand with extra-Eastern allegiances, with Westerners claiming to be protectors of Eastern Christians. Western religious missions accompanied most of the school business times. Colonial power and religious missions made common play, even at times when in Europe, in France in particular, anticlericalism the more virulent was the rule. These educational endeavors, led by Western religious, relied on their language. Entire fringes of the Christian population were educated in a foreign language. The enthusiasm for Christian schools spread throughout the population, and most of them welcomed pupils of all faiths. For Christians of different denominations, schools strengthened their community ties with the West and improved their status in a theocratic society: as a minority, Christians had lower status and many rights were denied them; the discriminatory regime to which they were subjected found an outlet in their ties with the Westerners who very quickly held the reins of power.

Nabil Saleh, in *The Qadi and the Fortune Teller*, portrays this game of power made up of ambiguity, desire and repulsion on the part of Muslims. The Western educational system seemed to them more desirable than theirs because it was more modern and gave access, in East and West, to careers more enviable than traditional careers and more suited to the evolution of society. Western Christian schools were able, in many cases, to adapt to this demand and leave their proselytizing concerns in the background. This is how prestigious institutions such as the American University of Beirut developed, whose missionary origins we tend to forget. These schools and universities wove new allegiances by imprinting different ways of thinking, working methods and language.

Edward Atiyah, in his autobiography *An Arab Tells His Story* shows how, during his schooling, loyalties were gradually moved from a religious community to a western nation. If, as we have just said, the schools favored a teaching of languages which led in certain cases to a acculturation, and if France and England shared the Middle East, one could suppose that there exists English-speaking literature. As we have said, this is not the case. Even if – to remain very schematic – the French Catholics were more numerous than the English and American Protestants, one should not forget to take into account important movements of emigration from Syria and Lebanon towards the United States from the late nineteenth century. Then during the second half of the twentieth century, we observed a sharp decline in the Francophony. Despite all these elements, English-language literature is still as scarce.

The geographic delimitation of a space and a language is not sufficient to establish this corpus. Many Arab American writers use English as their writing language. From various waves of emigration from Syria and Lebanon to the Americas, and in particular to the United States, they belong to the second or third generation of these communities which, at the origin of their establishment, at the end of the nineteenth century, knew how to keep a sense of community and a clear identity, while integrating in their host country. Gregory Orfalea, in his volume *Before the Flames: A Quest for the History of Arab Americans*, comments on the language problems the Arab migrants were facing:

> It was for this generation ... the most Americanized of all, that Arabic was a tongue whispered in warmth or shouted when a glass was broken at the dinner table. It was not the language that made friends or secured work, and it certainly was not useful in assembling a field rifle in the army. (Orfalea, 1988: 107)

The great pioneers of Mahjar – Gibran Kahlil Gibran, Ameen Rihani, Mikhail Naimy – and their fellow journalists from the Arab

press in the United States, have given birth to a line of Arab-American authors whose works are regularly published, either separately or as anthologies. One of the latest is called *Post-Gibran: Anthology of New Arab-American Writing* (2000). The title clearly indicates the parentage with the first writers who gradually abandoned Arabic in favor of English.

5. The writer's choice of language, the drama of the split identity

An early, dramatic example of the choice of language is *The Life of Omar Ibn Said* (1831), the Arab-speaking African slave who converted to Christianity and then wrote an autobiographical account in Arabic of his life as a slave. In his Introduction to *A Muslim American Slave. The Life of Omar Ibn Said* (2011), Ala Alryyes states that

> the knowledge of Arabic the narrative reveals sets Omar apart from other early African American writers of slave narratives in that Omar had the language – was literate – *before* being captured, and wrote in a language that most of his enslavers could not read. Unlike Olaudah Equiano, author in 1789 of the first slave narrative by an African, or Frederick Douglass, whose autobiography stages his learning to read and write as a primal scene ironically related to his slavery, Omar did not learn the language in which he wrote his autobiography during his captivity (Alryyes, 2011: 6).

Omar's *Life* remaps English-language slave narratives because it brings to light the unfamiliar expectations and interpretations of a different set of readers and also because, in recording Omar's reflections on his identity, his open praise of his masters, and his hidden resistance, it performs different rhetorical gestures and autobiographical symbolic actions that highlight his African education and his lingual alienation.

The passage from one language to another, especially with Gibran Khalil Gibran, is not clear cut but, on the contrary, there are many questions on the language of conception of the works. Indeed, we have excluded texts designed in a language other than English even if they have been translated by their own author. Some writers do not differentiate between translation and creation in English, and we believe that the writing process is largely influenced by the language chosen. The author's translation, if it takes into account a number of elements and favors certain choices that another translator would not consider, remains a rewriting, an interpretation: author and interpreter / translator overlap without ever being confused. Other authors, despite or because of their polyglossia, have left the translation work to others, and if we take the anthology cited above and consult the list of authors, we note some confusion. As in most of these anthologies, English texts and other texts translated from Arabic coexist. Some anthologies do not clearly indicate the translated texts, making research work more difficult. More

than often, some novels or collections of short stories or poetry given for works in English have turned out to be translations.

Among the authors who write in English, it is convenient to first consider those who were born and lived most or all of their life in the Middle East. These Arab Americans consider themselves Americans and not only refuse to privilege their Arabness but sometimes go so far as to deny it. We respect their choice of identity without, however, abandoning the hypothesis that a careful study of their works would probably reveal traces of fragmentation, of the in-between that can be seen in their elders of the first generation. Why else would they still accept the double American and Arabic label? Why write in English and in Arabic too?

Some authors, because they participate in both cultures, and because the two languages give them a knowledge of the interior of the two parts, try to undress the ideological truth to restore the Truth (if it is possible) and to fight against received ideas from wherever they come, as we can read in *Children of Bethany: The Story of a Palestinian Family*: "I am not in the business of pleasing people: presenting naked truths very seldom does. This is especially so when facts undermine national legend and interfere with accepted illusions" (Aburish 1988: 2). The language of power gives weight to this incredible truth since it comes from elsewhere. Considered, it has been said, as a language of culture, it is chosen as the vector of this unheard-of truth in this language. Because it is desired by many submissive peoples, because it is the language spread over all the surface of the map, it can bring this truth beyond the strict framework of the Near East: thanks to the English, the whole world can be taken to witness.

To be or not to be Arab when writing in another language: that's the question facing all these English-speaking writers, most of whom hesitate between two cultures. The choice of another language for various reasons (personal or external) automatically places them in this offbeat relationship with their culture and their language of origin but also with the language and culture chosen. In addition to the loyalty issues discussed above, this choice changes their relationship to space and time – and therefore to history. The structure of the new language calls into question their very structure, obliging them to a total re-evaluation of their benchmarks and their identifying points. This choice leads them to a crisis, even to a breaking point. How do they live and do they account for this rupture: that is the whole point of their texts which we quickly realize that they all have more or less an autobiographical form even when it is a question of fiction. Because there is a break in the course of their story, they find it difficult to resolve their problem of identity.

Dangling between two languages and two cultures, these writers have a blurred, floating image of themselves and the two cultural universes to which they belong. By trying to make the link, to become smugglers they make the splits, at the risk of being torn apart. Continuing the attempt to regroup in the autobiographies, they write, rewrite the same story, they write and rewrite themselves endlessly, because they write around a lack that the disappearance of Palestine adequately symbolizes.

The discursive negotiation of transnational connections to Arab homelands from a variegated and multilayered U.S. perspective has an integral role in creating a space for reformulating hegemonic and unilocal understandings of U.S. citizenship and belonging. In other words, the ways in which original Arab homelands, and their concomitant cultural and political byproducts, are imagined, replicated, portrayed, and lived by multiple generations of Arab-Americans in these texts invite new engagements with U.S. citizenship and belonging that are repositioned outside the frameworks of Orientalism and neo-imperialism.

Through Arab-American writers' and artists' strategic reconfigurations of the binary logics inherent in such constructs, Arab-Americans' connections to the Arab homelands become the main discursive vehicle for defying exclusionary and uniform types of United States citizenship. This way, the figure of the Arab-American body, as it draws on the memories and realities of an Arab homeland from within the US space, posits itself as a US entity to be contended with, despite all hegemonic efforts to define it outside the purview of US citizenship, or as the "enemy-alien" within.

In his oft-quoted study *Immigrant Narratives: Orientalism and Cultural Translation in Arab American and Arab British Literature* (2011), Waïl S. Hassan situates the works of Anglophone Arab writers together with the works of other immigrant and minority writers; however, his approach covers mostly Arab American and Arab British texts:

> … a distinction needs to be made between the work of immigrants and that of U.S.-and British-born writers, that the biculturalism of immigrants and exiles needs to be distinguished from what may be described, following W. E. B. Du Bois, as the "double-consciousness" of U.S.- and British-born writers. Although immigrants and immigrants' children are easy to homogenize under the aegis of minority, their experiences, adjustments, and perspectives require careful differentiation. (Hassan, 2012: xii)

Hassan's is one of those reference books that cover a large spectrum of Arab American and Arab British writers. In his discussion of the meaning of "home" for these writers, he insists on the meaning of

the loss of Palestine to Israel in 1948 as stipulated by the Partition Plan, and the significance of the memoirs written by those writers who had a first-hand experience of the *al-Nakba* – the exodus of over 70,000 Palestinians following the Partition. Hassan mentions a number of autobiographical writings and memoirs, all dealing, more or less, with the matter of al-Nakba: Fawaz Turki's *The Disinherited: Journal of a Palestinian Exile* (New York and London, New York University Press, 1972), *Soul in Exile: Lives of a Palestinian Revolutionary* (1988), and *Exile's Return: The Making of a Palestinian American* (New York, New York University Press, 1994); Edward Said's *Out of Place: A Memoir* (New York, Vintage Books, 1999); Jamil Toubbeh's *Day of the Long Night: A Palestinian Refugee Remembers the Nakba* (Jefferson, North Carolina, Mcfarland & Co Inc Pub 1998); and Aziz Shihab's *Does the Land Remember Me? A Memoir of Palestine* (New York, Syracuse University Press, 2007). What is interesting is that Hassan draws a similarity between the role played by these writings and the slave narratives and other accounts and testimonies of abuse and crimes "in that they concretize a historical trauma that may seem abstract to those unfamiliar with it, anchoring collective tragedy in individual experiences, and adding the human dimension often missing from historical accounts and ideological claims and counter-claims" (*Ibidem*: 114). Among the central themes of the Palestinian American memoirs, the critic mentions exile, loss, memory, and the concept of *Al-'Awda* (العودة, the return): "their coming-to-America stories revolve around loss and deracination, rather than fulfillment of destiny, attainment of a goal, or reaching a final destination" (*Ibidem*).

6. Gibran Khalil Gibran – the Self-Orientalizing Exile

On April 30, 2002, Professor Irfan Shihad delivered The Inaugural Farhat J. Ziadeh Distinguished Lecture in Arab and Islamic Studies, "Gibran Khalil Gibran between Two Millenia", and he mentioned American President Bill Clinton quoting Gibran Khalil Gibran on the occasion of the Second Annual Kahlil Gibran Spirit of Humanity Awards, sponsored by the Arab-American Institute Foundation. The President, who had read Gibran in college, cited his favorite Gibran quote, "All work is empty save when there is love. When you work with love, you bind yourself to yourself: and to one another, and to God." Actually, the President was citing from *The Prophet*:

> You have been told also that life is darkness, and in your weariness you echo what was said by the weary.
> And I say that life is indeed darkness save when there is urge,
> And all urge is blind save when there is knowledge,
> And all knowledge is vain save when there is work,

> And all work is empty save when there is love;
> And when you work with love you bind yourself to yourself, and to one another, and to God. (Gibran, 1962: 28–29)

Bill Clinton's reference to the poet, philosopher and artist who once said, "No one writes with ink as someone who writes with blood in the heart" (ليس من يكتب باالحبر كمن يكتب بدم القلب) is not surprising. Thomas Jefferson owned a copy of the Holy Qur'an, the Turkish Sultan Abdülmecid I commissioned a Commemorative Plaque for the Washington Monument (Washington D.C.) in 1853, and there is a representation of Islam in the "Evolution of Civilization" mural of the Library of Congress (Washington D.C.).

On the other hand, early Arab American literature is taught and discussed in the American universities. Such a discussion does include the works of the *Mahjar* (Arabic المهجر, immigrant) group of poets (also referred to as the Mahjar School in Modern Arabic Literature) who – through their literary activity in New York – achieved prominence on the Arabic literary scene. With the exception of Rihani and Kahlil Gibran (who first wrote in Arabic and later in English), the other members of the group wrote in Arabic. According to Wail S. Hassan,

> The Arabic poetry of the group represents, in its own way, a minor literature that revolutionized Arabic poetry. They pioneered a movement that rebelled against the time-honored conventions of Arabic poetry, conventions which had recently been infused with new vigor by Mahmud Sami Al-Barudi, Ahmad Shawqi, Hafiz Ibrahim, and others who, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century found inspiration in classical Arabic poetry (Hassan, 2011: 59).

In 1910, Gibran became the leader of the *Mahjar* group and also the president of the *Al-Rabitah al-qalamiyyah* (Arabic الرابطة القلمية the "Pen League") that he founded in 1920. Besides Gibran, the group included Syrian poet and writer Naseeb Aridah, Syrian poet William Catzeflis, Lebanese poet Rasheed Ayoub, Syrian writer Abdul Maseh Haddad and his brother Nudrah Haddad, and Lebanese poet Mikhail Naimy.

Gibran Khalil Gibran (جبران خليل جبران, 1883-1931) was and remains one of the most popular and controversial Arab poets and prose writers. Born in 1883 in Bisharri, a village in North Lebanon, in a Christian family, he immediately became interested in studies, meditations and reflections. Around the age of 15, he emigrated with his family to Boston, in the United States. But two years later, he felt the need to return to Lebanon, to deepen his knowledge of the Arabic language and literature. It was at the Beirut School of Wisdom that he completed his training, and that he lived his unhappy idyll which he narrated in his poetic novel *Broken Wings*, a book translated into many

languages. He returns to his sister in the United States for the death of his mother. He also stays in Paris where he meets people such as the sculptor Rodin and the Belgian poet Maurice Maeterlinck. He returned to the United States, settled in New York and remained there until the end of his life in 1931.

Gibran was therefore an emigrant of the time and participated in many literary circles as part of the literary school of *Mahjar*, the school of emigration. The latter was composed of literate Arabs living abroad, especially in the United States, such as Mikhail Naimy and many others. From there, these different writers, on the one hand, were able to write what they wanted and have it edited without problems, on the other hand, were outside of Arab countries, therefore on the fringes, better placed to criticize, less good for living the evolutions of the Levant countries. This is perhaps one of the reasons that prompted Gibran to decide not to write in Arabic anymore, and to switch to English. Why that? And can we continue to consider him as one of the great writers of the Arabic language? As an Arab scholar, Gibran began to write in Arabic, which is quite natural, in prose but also in poetry. But, and he explains it in an article on the Arabic language, he finds the classical Arabic language frozen, and being aware of his inability to reform it, he deliberately turns to the English language: it is therefore for him a failure report. One can wonder if this decision of Gibran can not marginalize it and condemn it to be read only by an English-speaking and Western public.

Gibran widens his range of readers, since he addresses Arab readers on the one hand and English-speaking readers on the other, but he marginalizes himself and is exposed to criticism from certain traditionalist, even sectarian, Muslim circles. who do not grant him the right to criticize, as Gibran did, the mores, habits both Christian and Muslim elsewhere, because in Lebanon at that time – under Ottoman domination – the Christian religion has chains like the Islam can have them, marriages are arranged through the priest or bishop of the Maronites, under the guise of modernism – as literary renaissance requires – and the Arab, Christian or Muslim Orient was more than ever attached to its traditions, moral rules and respect for ancestral habits.

Two of his works were published in Arabic: *al-'Arwah al-Mutamarridah* ("Rebellious Spirits"), in 1906, and *'Ara'is al-Muruj* ("Nymphs of the Valley"), in 1908. another novel, *al-'Ajnihah al-Mutakassirah*, ("The Broken Wings"), and in 1914 a collection of poems in prose *Dam'ah wa Ibtisamah*, ("A Tear and a Smile"), followed by the first work in English, *The Madman*, his parables and poems, published in 1918. It is a prolific period for Gibran who continues to produce works in both languages: *al-Mawakib*, ("The Procession",

1919); *al-'Awasif* ("The Tempests", 1920); *al-Badayi 'wa Taray'if*, ("Beautiful and Rare Sayings", 1925); *The Forerunner: His Parables and Poems* (1920) (*Ibidem*, 117-134).

For Gibran, 1923 was a turning point, with the publication of *The Prophet*, written and illustrated by him and selling 1300 copies in a single month, and bringing him economic independence. He became a celebrity in Greenwich Village and a legendary halo expanded around his figure, fueled by the shy character and hermit life of the artist. He continued to write in English and published *Sand and Foam* in 1926; *Jesus, the Son of Man: His Words and his Deeds as Told and Recorded by Those who Knew Him* in 1927.

The Prophet cannot be classified as a real novel as it consists of a set of 26 poetic sermons on different themes that Almustafa, the chosen one, holds in front of the people of Orphalese, the city from which he is about to leave. Here too the autobiographical references are evident: Almustafa can be identified with Gibran himself, Almitra, the seer, with Mary Haskell; the city of Orphalese represents New York where Almustafa, like Gibran, spent twelve years before, respectively, the departure and publication of the book; the island of birth where Almustafa heads instead represents Lebanon. As previously stated, the success of the book was so great that in 1957 the millionth copy had already been sold and *The Prophet* had been translated into twenty languages. Gibran proclaims the unity of being, believes in the reconciliation of opposites: good and evil are inseparable, joy and pain are two sides of the same coin, life and death depend on each other, and there is no past or future but only an eternal present. He himself is the symbol of this unity: in him East and West merge, religious and pagan, ancient and modern, past and present. There are numerous influences on the basis of this work: Westerners, such as Blake, Nietzsche, Walt Whitman, romanticism, the Bible, Emerson, and Oriental, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Sufi mysticism. Of the Bible, in particular, it adopts the language rich in aphorisms but at the same time understandable by all. But, while the language refers to the Bible and to English romanticism, the message refers to the central spirit of Sufi thought: unity of life and death, of body and soul, of good and evil, of time and space, of religion, of human being, pantheism and the relationship between form and essence. Almustafa unites all religions proclaiming the rule that unites them: do to others what you want done to you. Also in this case the message is timeless and proposes a positive approach to life (Bushrui, Jenkins, 1998: 224–238).

If *The Prophet* was a success from the start, Khalil Gibran remained for a long time in relative obscurity. On the one hand, a good number of texts in the Arabic language were only translated into French

very late or not at all. On the other hand, his work has raised questions in the West. Gibran endeavored, in his writings, to campaign for the reconciliation between Christianity, Islam, spirituality, and materialism, the East and the West. In his desire to reconcile Christianity and Islam, he said that he "kept Jesus in one half of his bosom and Muhammad in the other" (Bushrui, 1998: 6). However, the West, in its ethnocentric approach, has superbly ignored the "meaningless" mysticism of Gibran, thus rejecting any approach aimed at promoting the unity of culture. "East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet," said Rudyard Kipling in his poem "The Ballad of East and West". It is interesting to note that in France, decades after his introduction by Pierre Loti and André Gide, Gibran's literary contribution is still wrongly discredited and identified with a mixture of theosophy and pantheism. This mistake is the fruit of its paradoxical nature and of a cruel ignorance of Syriac monasticism and of the political and religious feudalism that it denounces. His texts draw their sap from the very sources of Eastern Christianity, not exempt from a Sufi influence. In a letter to Mikhail Naimy, dated January 1, 1921, Gibran wrote: "The West is now a machine, and everything in it is tied to the machine".

However, his overwhelming literary contribution "constitutes a real bridge between East and West" according to Suheil Bushrui, one of his biographers. Gibran sheds new light between "the self" and the other. The self being plural and multiple, is more of a process than a border. It calls for the overcoming of closed and corseted particularisms within borders. In itself, the individuality of the person does not constitute his identity. In the poem "The Voice of the Poet" (صوت الشاعر) published in *A Tear and a Smile* (1914), he wrote:

> انت اخي وانا احبك . احبك ساجداً في جامعك وراكعاً في هيكلك ومصلياً في كنيستك ، فأنت وانا ابنا دين واحد هو الروح ، وزعماء فروع هذا الدين اصابع ملتصقة في يد الالوهية المشيرة الى كمال النفس .
>
> You are my brother and I love you. I love you when you prostrate yourself in your mosque, and kneel in your church and pray in your synagogue. You and I are sons of one faith—the Spirit. And those that are set up as heads over its many branches are as fingers on the hand of a divinity that points to the Spirit's perfection. (Gibran, 1950: 193)

Gibran Khalil Gibran was an artist and complete thinker, poet, novelist, essayist, painter, portraitist and illustrator, great lover of oriental music, whose experience has intertwined East and West. He presented himself as an oriental magus inspiring a new breath to the disembodied materialism of a decadent Europe and, like a modern thinker, trained in Paris and New York, came to renew the secular Arabic writing. His work, both Arab and American, draws happily from the two legacies. It is the singularity of his ancient Maronite faith that

gives him this right and this possibility of an almost apologetic message centered on Christ, this other oriental who became hero of the West, to be renovated incarnating the herald of the East.

7. Conclusions

Postcolonial literature flourishes in a situation which, in the beginning, implied repression and resistance, hatred and victimization, and in which, nowadays, the common language sets a bridge between cultures. One conclusion would be that a strategy that writers and strategists alike should adopt and propagate is decolonizing places towards an independent identity of place. The role of postcolonial literature in this re-imagination of new decentered and decolonized territories could be crucial.

Arab-American writers and critics (as well as activists, artists, and cultural workers) have been responding in their works to these rigid and limited readings of Arab and Muslim bodies in the United States. In doing so, they articulate a rising need among Arab-Americans for a transformative project of communal and individual self-representation, one that captures the complexity and heterogeneity of their communities. Such efforts, however, have hardly forced Arab-American literary productions to conform to a didactic and proclaimed platform. Instead, they have rendered them a valuable creative space for delineating shared and individual concerns regarding Arab-Americans' myriad positions and outlooks in the United States, their connections to original Arab homelands, and their negotiations of the complexities of citizenship and belonging in the United States.

Orientalism, then, as a theatrical stage of the east, is a representative conglomerate – of mimesis although not in the Aristotelian way – of customary paintings, stories and assumptions that lead to think in the east. The East – as a peculiar effect of language – has been created and recreated to later become a connotative instance of common and folklore places until we are fed up. The East not only referred to a purely geographical entity, but also to certain cultural, ideological, political, economic, religious and to some extent moral and aesthetic spaces. Taking into account the visible inability to identify the Orient and the Oriental, we can move towards what Said has called "Orientalism" which in the first instance can be answered almost unconsciously as a way of relating to the east. However, the nature or characteristics of this way of relating must be stressed; that is, at no time does Said state that this look towards the Oriental be innocent, naive or lack of interest, but quite the opposite.

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