

# Writing Arab-American Identity Post 9/11

**Carol N. Fadda-Conrey**

In their introduction to the first anthology of Arab-American short fiction, *Dinarzad's Children: An Anthology of Contemporary Arab American Fiction*, editors Pauline Kaldas and Khaled Mattawa (2004) comment on the inextricable link between the global political repercussions triggered by the events of 9/11 and the need to assert Arab-American literature on the US literary map. They write,

Post-September 11, the invasion of Afghanistan, the extralegal treatment of Arab Americans, [and] the war on Iraq must be considered turning points not only for the community but also for the larger American public's awareness of this community's existence. Arab Americans could not try to engage the world and remain anonymous. (p. xiii)

The stark realization faced by many Arab-Americans post-9/11 was that their heretofore relative anonymity and even invisibility among the ranks of US communities was being replaced by blanket representations that often portrayed them in a derogatory light. Such representations were and still are in large part induced by the limited and binary rhetoric (you are either with us or against us, patriotic vs. unpatriotic) that characterized a stricken and angry post-9/11 US public. Even before September 2001, Arab-Americans often found themselves being compromised as "members of a demonized community," which has been used to explain why "Arab-American writers in the United States have, of necessity, tended to address communal concerns more than individual ones" (Mattawa and Akash, 1999, p. xii). Such a communal focus in the works of Arab-American writers has not abated in the wake of 9/11, but has been widened and transformed to incorporate and attest to the diversity of such a community.

The period following September 2001 did not only generate a need on the part of Arab-Americans and Muslim-Americans to deflect the terrorism and fanaticism charges targeting them, but has made it important for Arab-American poets, fiction writers, journalists, and essayists to point out the historical injustices that fellow Arabs in the Middle East had been subjected to by US foreign policy. By doing so, these writers contextualize the 9/11 attacks and move them beyond simplistic "they are jealous of our freedom" rationalizations. Moreover, the post-9/11 era does not point to an emergence or even re-emergence of Arab-American literature per se (since in fact its presence dates to the early 1900s). This conflict-ridden period rather attests to the maturation of this community's literature, which has attained a complexity in its themes and concerns, extending to religious, cultural, and national investigations that has made literature a very suitable and necessary medium for Arab-Americans' self-representation, with respect to their pursuit of agency.

Such a complexity is portrayed in the array of works by and about Arab-Americans published after 9/11 (including novels, memoirs, books of poetry, journal issues, as well as literary criticism and non-fiction pieces). The fact that the majority of these works have appeared in the last couple of years does not only attest to the lengthy processes characterizing the publishing world's timetables, but also points to the need for a period of mourning, rumination, and reflection before a national tragedy could be handled critically and examined on a large scale through the lens of literature. Nevertheless, examples abound of creative and journalistic pieces by Arab-Americans that appeared right after the September 2001 events, denouncing the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon and the subsequent invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as the ensuing backlash against Arab-Americans, Muslim-Americans, and anyone exhibiting any physical connection to Arab and/or Muslim culture, whether by way of dress, color, accent, or behavior.

Naomi Shihab Nye's (2002) online piece, for instance, "An Open Letter from Naomi Shihab Nye to Any Would-Be Terrorists," was published weeks after 9/11, and simultaneously exemplifies the anguish of national trauma as well as its ostracizing effects on Arab-American and Muslim-American minorities. Addressing "any would-be terrorists," Nye recounts the personal experience of people like her Palestinian father and American mother, her Palestinian cousins in Texas and their "beautiful brown little boys," and her Palestinian grandmother who lived in Jerusalem till she was 106 years old – all of whom, by way of simple day-to-day actions showing compassion and a shared humanity, constantly defied the divisive political and religious forces pulling peoples and cultures apart. "I beg you," she writes to the faceless terrorist, "as your distant Arab cousin, as your American neighbor, listen to me. Our hearts are broken, as yours may also feel broken in some ways we can't understand, unless you tell us in words. Killing people won't tell us. We can't read that message. Find another way to live ... Make our family proud" (Nye, 2002, ¶ 18). Thus, identifying herself as not only a Palestinian with deep roots in the Arab world, but also as an American devastated by the loss of human life as a result of the 9/11 attacks, Nye underscores her double national allegiances, not favoring one over the other, but aiming to bridge the differences that are constantly at play in separating the Arab from the American.

Moreover, by beseeching the terrorists to "[m]ake our family proud," Nye draws on one of the most cherished values in Arab culture, the family, not only in its confined definition that encompasses the ties connecting the immediate members of a nuclear family, nor even the one linking distant relatives to a common ancestor, but signifying the bonds that run across various Arab cultures, relating the nuanced Arab identities across the Arab world to a shared familial, cultural, linguistic, geographical, or even religious root. Stressing the importance of the written word, Nye points again and again, in this piece and elsewhere in her work, to the healing and bridging power of literature, and especially poetry.

For Arab-American writers like Nye and others, the opportunity to voice Arab-American concerns in the period after 9/11 helps bring Arab-American literature into the limelight, thus lifting the shroud of invisibility that has plagued Arab-Americans for a long time. But such visibility, or even hyper-visibility, is not as clear-cut or unproblematic as it may seem. For increasing the focus on Arab-Americans does not necessarily decrease this group's invisibility nor does it automatically result in diminishing confusions about this group's identity. Limited or generalized portrayals of this group might even increase its invisibility, or its altogether quick exit from national local interests if closer attention is not given to the varying ethnic, religious, national, political, and cultural components of the Arab-American individual and communal make-up.

In their introduction to *MIT-EJMES's* special Spring 2005 issue, *Gender, Nation and*

*Belonging*, the editors Rabab Abdulhadi, Nadine Naber, and Evelyn Alsultany highlight their feminist concerns in relation to the post 9/11 repercussions against Arabs, Arab-Americans, and Muslim-Americans. They point out that discussions of the racialized and ostracized treatment meted out to members of these communities were to the most part limited to “masculinized terms that overlook the differential, yet relational, racialization of Arab women and men” (pp. 14-15). To give attention to such “differential” treatment “entails considering the impact of the aftermath of September 11<sup>th</sup> on feminist movements and radical spaces, in general, and Arab and Arab-American women’s participation in these spaces” (p. 15). Such endeavors contribute to the dismantling of blanket and erroneous portrayals of Arabs and Arab-Americans as being indistinguishably homogenous, and include important dissenting voices that invigorate the study of these communities, thus rendering portrayals of their collective makeup more complex in nature. Pointing to strong feminist voices within these communities, for example, helps disentangle Arab women not only from the constraints of their patriarchal societies, but also from the condescending campaign heralded by some “white American feminists” to save their oppressed Arab and Arab-American sisters from repressive religions and regimes.

Amal Amireh (2005), for one, in her piece entitled “Palestinian Women’s Disappearing Act: The Suicide Bomber Through Western Feminist Eyes,” discusses what for the West constitutes the anomaly of the female suicide bomber (who does not fit the Orientalist “docile bod[y]” stereotype, 230). This gendered bomber becomes a direct counterpoint to the way in which after 9/11 the West hijacked the image of the Muslim woman, wholly represented by “the veiled and beaten body of the Afghan woman under the Taliban,” and used it as one of the important tenets justifying the invasion of Afghanistan and the overthrow of Taliban rule. “[In] the aftermath of September 11<sup>th</sup>,” Amireh (2005) points out, “U.S. feminists played a key role in disseminating this profile [of the Muslim woman], when the Feminist Majority, a prominent U.S. feminist organization, joined forces with the Bush Administration to ‘liberate’ the bodies of the downtrodden women of Afghanistan” (p. 230).

A host of Arab-American writers, featured in the *MIT-EJMES* special issue and elsewhere, including Amal Amireh, Mervat Hatem, and Therese Saliba reject such a wholesale exploitation of what Darraj (2005) dubs “the Faceless Veiled Woman,” calling for Arab and Arab-American feminists to offer their own varied voices in the face of such blanket representations (p. 164). Moreover, as Darraj (2005) correctly points out in her essay “Personal and Political: The Dynamics of Arab American Feminism,” Arab and Arab-American women often have to struggle on two different fronts, the first occurring within the larger cadres of their societies and the second taking place within the smaller spheres of their communities and families. In this way, discussions of the racial stereotyping and ostracizing of Arab-Americans and Muslim-Americans in the aftermath of 9/11 have to take into account the communal gender differences characterizing these groups, or the “differential, yet relational, racialization of Arab women and men” (Abdulhadi, Naber, and Alsultany, 2005, p. 15). Accounting for such differences would automatically result in paying closer attention to what the editors of *MIT-EJMES*’s special issue identify as the participation of Arab and Arab-American women in the “radical spaces,” whether they be literary, political, cultural, or religious that were directly formed, or at least impacted, by the events of 9/11 (Abdulhadi, Naber, and Alsultany, 2005, p. 15).

Arab-American literature, then, becomes an important tool to establish and practice self-representation, and to dismantle blanket and inaccurate portrayals inherent in such generalized concepts as the “Faceless Veiled Arab Woman” or the “Muslim Woman.” The response of many Arab- and Muslim-American writers to these types of monolithic

stereotypes that became especially rampant post-9/11 was to write their own versions of what it means to be Arab, Arab-American, or Muslim living in a US that has become increasingly hostile toward them. Such an approach ultimately helps alleviate the invisibility plaguing Arab-Americans by enabling them to achieve the necessary autonomy needed to define and explore their multiplicity in their pursuit of agency.

Some literary pieces that focus primarily on the post 9-11 experience as presented from an Arab-American perspective include poetry by female writers like Syrian-American Mohja Kahf, Palestinian-American Suheir Hammad, and Lebanese-American Dima Hilal, all of whom, in the wake of the attacks, turned to their literary work as a way to express their anger, pain, and fear after finding themselves in a precarious position, caught between their American and Arab allegiances. This focus on poetry stems from and corroborates Nye's comments in her introduction to *19 Varieties of Gazelle*, in which she writes about her feelings of helplessness and frustration triggered by the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center, stating:

I kept thinking, as did millions of other people, what can we do? Writers, believers in words, could not give up words when the going got rough. I found myself, as millions did, turning to poetry ... Poetry slows us down, cherishes small details. A larger disaster erases those details. We need poetry for nourishment and noticing, for the way language and imagery reach comfortably into experience, holding and connecting it more successfully than any news channel we could name. (p. xvi)

Heeding Nye's call to write poetry and voice the Arab-American experience in the wake of 9/11, writers like Kahf, Hammad, Hilal, and Handal turn to writing as a way to humanize Arab-American identities, pointing to their subtle individual nuances in the face of an overwhelming drive to define them in terms of the enemy. Hammad's (2003) poem, "First Writing Since," written a week after the attacks and widely distributed on the internet, starkly depicts the fresh wounds of the nation's collective trauma, albeit from an Arab/Arab-American perspective, which was automatically held under suspicion by a grieving and angry US majority. Upon hearing about the attacks, the speaker in the poem states, "please god, after the second plane, please, don't let it be anyone / who looks like my brothers" (p. 3). But with the realization that the pilots who drove planes into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon do look like her Arab brothers, the speaker, and by extension Arab-Americans generally, had to tackle a traumatizing conflict that pitted the two parts of their hyphenated identities against each other: they could not adequately grieve as Americans since their Arab physical attributes and affiliations connected them with what quickly became synonymous with evil or simply, anti-American.

In a similar vein, Dima Hilal's (2004) poem "America" also deals with the anguish of the Arab-American immigrants who have left their war-torn country behind, only to be faced with violence and personal threats in their new homeland. Including herself among the ranks of these immigrants, the speaker writes, "we fade into the fabric of these united states / until a plane carves a path though steel and glass / until the sudden sidelong glance / it's us versus them / are you with us / or against us?" (pp. 105-106). In this poem, Hilal shows how simplistic national allegiances prevalent after 9/11 negate the complexity of Arab-American identities with their myriad ties to an originary homeland as well as their roots in a promising yet suddenly turned hostile present environment. As a result, the "American dream" becomes accessible only to those who denounce their multiple national belongings and submit to the assimilative demands of a melting-pot America that suspects and battles against difference. As one of the youngest Arab-American poets, Hilal portrays through her work the need to acknowledge the diversity of American identities, thus enacting what critic Salaita (2005) terms the transformation of "'the American way of life'

into ‘American ways of life’” (p. 165).

As a counterpoint to the anger, pain, bitterness, and frustration of the Arab-American speakers depicted in the aforementioned poems by Hammad and Hilal, a conciliatory tone dominates Kahf’s poem “We Will Continue Like Twin Towers,” published in her collection of poems *E-mails from Scheherazad* (2003). This poem depicts two strangers, on the day of the 9/11 attacks, holding hands and flying through the air down from one of the buildings of the World Trade Center. Finding beauty in the heart-breaking image of two people taking the plunge to meet their deaths brings out the collective anguish of witnessing the 9/11 experience and emphasizes the shared humanity amongst people, despite their apparent difference of color, religion, or accent. Marking the fragility of human lives, this poem reveals how a devastating event like 9/11 can bring about reconciliation, continuity, and understanding between people, whether they be Americans, hyphenated Americans, or non-Americans; between strangers, even if it means taking a step, hand in hand, into a dangerous and even fatal unknown.

Another poem from Kahf’s *E-mails from Scheherazad*, entitled “The Fires Have Begun,” also deals directly with the experience of 9/11. Unlike “We Will Continue Like Twin Towers,” however, the identity of the speaker in this short poem remains unknown. Nevertheless, it still captures the speaker’s debilitating vacillation between anger and love, revenge and forgiveness, contrasting emotions that characterized the prevalent mood in the US in the period immediately following 9/11: “There is a World Love Center inside my ribcage / There is a World Hate Center inside me too / The fires have begun” (Kahf, 2003, p. 84). Whereas all the poems by Hammad, Hilal, and Kahf discussed earlier depict a clearly identified Arab-American or Muslim-American speaker, this poem voices the poignant and at the same time disturbing wavering of a speaker who feels deeply affected by the events of September 11, yet whose identity, like the outcome of his/her internal struggle, remains undetermined. The ambiguous identity of the speaker complicates and even contradicts the simplistic us vs. them rhetoric characterizing the post-9/11 dominant mindset, so much so that hate and love, just like us and them, Americans and non-Americans, cease to be separate and unrelated entities, and hate and revenge cease to be the rightful reactions of solely one group (the majority). Instead, love and hate become the natural reactions of both “full-fledged” Americans and hyphenated Americans. In this way, Arab- and Muslim-Americans are able to participate in mourning for the 9/11 victims (including those who were victims of racial hate crimes following the attacks on the World Trade Center), thus breaking down such artificial binaries as the grieving from the non-grieving, or the patriotic from the unpatriotic.

Using literature as a means to counter the silence and caution that shrouds the experiences of Arab-Americans in the US in the wake of 9/11 is to push this minority group in “new directions” (Majaj, 1999, p. 67). The era following 9/11 is one in which Arab-American literature has encountered the right, although tumultuous, circumstances that have enabled it to advance to this current stage that can be identified as a new Arab-American literary renaissance. Arab-Americans must seize this important historical moment to make their voices heard, at the same time dedicating time and energy to the honing of their creative, academic, and rhetorical skills in order to ensure a recognized and long-lasting position in the US literary and non-literary milieu. Moreover, the versatility of genres currently emanating from the Arab-American scene attests to such an evolution of talents, which are not only limited to fiction, poetry, and essays, but extend, for instance, to drama, comic strips, stand-up comedy, and rap, thus providing different outlets to the diversity of Arab-American voices.

In their pursuit of writing their identities to avoid having it written for them (Aziz, 2004,

p. xiii), Arab-Americans, in their march toward a more complex literary positioning in the twenty-first century, are steadfastly carrying out the sound advice of Palestinian-American writer and critic Lisa Suheir Majaj (1999), who writes: "At century's end [and continuing into the current century], our split vision may be our most important legacy, forcing us to direct our gaze not only backwards, to the past, but forward, to an as-yet-unwritten future" (p. 77). These first few years of the twenty-first century have definitely offered a promising and exciting glimpse into this "as-yet-unwritten future" or the wealth of what-is-yet-to-come in Arab-American literature. This field's widening spheres point to new and forever expanding horizons, demanding new visions, constant transformative dialogue, and multiple connections forged by Arab-American literature within the US as well as between the US and the Arab world.

Carol Fadda-Conrey is visiting assistant professor at St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia.  
Email: cfaddaco@sju.edu

---

## REFERENCES

- Abdulhadi, R., Naber, N., & Alsultany, E.** (2005, Spring). Gender, nation, and belonging: Arab and Arab-American feminist perspectives. *The MIT Electronic Journal of Middle East Studies*, 5, 1-279. Retrieved July 20, 2006, from <http://web.mit.edu/CIS/www/mitejmes/intro.htm>
- Amireh, A.** (2005, Spring). Palestinian women's disappearing act: The suicide bomber through Western feminist eyes. *The MIT Electronic Journal of Middle East Studies*, 5, 228-242. Retrieved July 20, 2006, from [http://web.mit.edu/cis/www/mitejmes/issues/200507/MITEJMES\\_Vol\\_5\\_Spring.pdf](http://web.mit.edu/cis/www/mitejmes/issues/200507/MITEJMES_Vol_5_Spring.pdf)
- Aziz, B. N.** (2004). Foreword. In S. M. Darraj (Ed.), *Scheherazade's legacy: Arab and Arab American women on writing* (pp. xi-xv). Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Darraj, S. M.** (2005, Spring). Personal and political: The dynamics of Arab American feminism. *The MIT Electronic Journal of Middle East Studies*, 5, 158-168. Retrieved July 20, 2006, from [http://web.mit.edu/cis/www/mitejmes/issues/200507/MITEJMES\\_Vol\\_5\\_Spring.pdf](http://web.mit.edu/cis/www/mitejmes/issues/200507/MITEJMES_Vol_5_Spring.pdf)
- Darraj, S. M.** (Ed.). (2004). *Scheherazade's legacy: Arab and Arab American women on writing*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Hammad, S.** (2003). First writing since. In M. J. Alexander, *Sing, whisper, shout, pray! Feminist visions for a just world* (pp. 3-7). Fort Bragg, CA: EdgeWork Books.
- Hatem, M.** (2005, Spring). Arab and Arab American feminism after September 11, 2001: Meeting the external and internal challenges facing our communities. *The MIT Electronic Journal of Middle East Studies*, 5, 37-49. Retrieved July 20, 2006, from [http://web.mit.edu/cis/www/mitejmes/issues/200507/MITEJMES\\_Vol\\_5\\_Spring.pdf](http://web.mit.edu/cis/www/mitejmes/issues/200507/MITEJMES_Vol_5_Spring.pdf)
- Hilal, D.** (2004). America. In S. M. Darraj (Ed.), *Scheherazade's legacy: Arab and Arab American women on writing*, (pp. 104-06). Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Kahf, M.** (2003). *E-mails from Scheherazad*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida.
- Kaldas, P. & Khaled, M.** (2004). Introduction. In P. Kaldas & M. Khaled (Eds.), *Dinarzad's Children: An Anthology of Contemporary Arab American Fiction* (pp. ix-xiv). Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press.
- Majaj, L. S.** (1999). New directions: Arab-American writing at century's end. In K. Mattawa, & M. Akash (Eds.), *Post-Gibran: Anthology of new Arab American writing* (pp. 67-77). Maryland: Kitab.
- Mattawa, K. & Akash, M.** (1999). Introduction. In K. Mattawa, & M. Akash (Eds.), *Post-Gibran: Anthology of new Arab American writing* (pp. xi-xiii). Maryland: Kitab.
- Nye, N. S.** (2002). *19 Varieties of Gazelle: Poems of the Middle East*. New York: Greenwillow.
- Nye, N. S.** (n.d.). To any would-be terrorists. *About.com: poetry*. Retrieved September 15, 2005, from <http://poetry.about.com/library/weekly/aa100901a.htm>
- Saliba, T.** (2005, Spring). On Rachel Corrie and the meaning of feminist solidarity. *The MIT Electronic Journal of Middle East Studies*, 5, 215-227. Retrieved July 20, 2006, from [http://web.mit.edu/cis/www/mitejmes/issues/200507/MITEJMES\\_Vol\\_5\\_Spring.pdf](http://web.mit.edu/cis/www/mitejmes/issues/200507/MITEJMES_Vol_5_Spring.pdf)
- Salaita, S.** (2005). Ethnic identity and imperative patriotism: Arab Americans before and after 9/11. *College Literature*, 32(2), 146-168.