

Assimilation versus Acculturation: writing as a crossroad

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ABSTRACT

For many exiled and diasporic bodies, assimilation promises a safe haven under which they believe they can escape the ills and pains of discrimination, oppression and racism. Through such attempts, these people rarely think of the expenses they will find themselves paying due to complete assimilation. The daily external and internal struggles are unbearable and unconscious assimilation increases the bitterness and deformation of their dual identities. Juxtaposing Dinarzad's *Children: An Anthology of Contemporary Arab Fiction* (2009) and *Growing up Ethnic in America: Contemporary Fiction About Learning to Be American* (1999), this paper aims at presenting acculturation, or conscious assimilation, as an alternative that can help secure a true identity and voice of immigrants, especially Arab Americans. Along hand, this work sheds light on the crucial need for Arab Americans to seek a place within the American literal world and increase their narrations and documentations. Through comparing the multiple faces of assimilation found in the selected literal works, this study argues that pinpointing these negative aspects is itself positive or a form of conscious assimilation urging the Arab American identity to vocalize its existence through literature. Ultimately, this paper paves the way for future questions and further research that underscore the political rightness of acculturation and literal narration in preserving the authority and authenticity of dual identities, particularly of Arab Americans.

Keywords: Assimilation; Acculturation; identity; homogeneity; integration; aesthetic.

Introduction

Today, to be or not to be revolves around our ability to feel accepted, acknowledged and included within a world that is getting more and more raciest and separated by physical and mental boundaries. The less privileged one is, the more threatened the dream of 'Home' gets. Races, ethnicities, political, economic and religious affiliations determine our visibility and mobility. We are either seen or not and it all depends on the stronger our voice is and how frequent our stories get written down as witnesses and evidence of existence. 'Home' should not only be physical land of ancestors. This is not to underestimate the importance of roots, but it's a call for marginalized, oppressed and exiled persons and nations to seek a feeling of relief and inclusion within the world regardless of where one is.

Professor Milton Gordon in his book *Assimilation in American life* (1964) clarifies that the "melting pot" does not completely describe the American society and that often immigrants and minority groups have often maintained a distance between their new home; America and themselves. Assimilation seems to be a far reached dream, not only due to the rejection of the host country but also due to the resistance of immigrants and their own struggles with their dual identities. Many Arab American authors highlight this fact and stress the need for seeking a true identity that does not compensate any of the multiple sides of the Arab Americans identity. Edward Said has always been a citizen of "in betweenness" and has expressed in more than one occasion his contentment to be so. Like many other scholars, wondering between worlds and realms might be a better choice than being completely lost and fixed in one that shrinks immigrants' true identities.

Arab Americans' existence in the United States has gone through various stages and ranged between visibility and non-existence. Many scholars agree that they have come to the United States as sojourner aiming to go home one

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day. Their literal contributions have always been affected by political, social and racial upheavals all over the world. In many contexts and narrations they have been regarded as others and rejected as aliens due to the lack of true representation, authentic voices as well as complete assimilation. Nevertheless, and with their increasing literal production, Arab Americans have realized the trap of assimilation and its effect on their originality and their existence as dual identities within their host society. In her article "Arab-American Literature: Origins and Developments", Lisa Suhair Majaj argues that "This literary burgeoning reflects in part the shifting historical, social, and political contexts that have pushed Arab-Americans to the foreground, creating both new spaces for their voices and new urgencies of expression, as well as the flourishing creativity of these writers." (Majaj, 1)

Art is surely the alternative we have to grasp today to stand tall in front of subjugation, displacement and muzzles. I am arguing here that works like *Dinarzad's Children: An Anthology of Contemporary Arab Fiction* and *Growing up Ethnic in America: Contemporary Fiction About Learning to Be American* are virtual homes for ethnic and racial groups who are often victims of marginalization and deformation, especially Arab Americans. Due to dreams of acceptance and complete assimilation, in addition to their lack of self-acknowledgment and wobbly voice, Arab Americans often end up objects.

Complete Assimilation: the trap

In their anthology, Kaldas and Mattawa suggest that throughout the twentieth century different ethnic authors have emerged by sharing their individual experiences through writing, while Arab-American authors have had a diminished literary contribution which made them seem as insignificant to the discourse as Dinarzad is in *The Thousand and One Nights*. They cannot be Shahrazad's children unless they unlock their voices within the 'Home' they reside in order to be included and heard. Other minorities within American community are fighting harder through aesthetic documentations to prove who they are, what their true cultures are, and surely who their ancestors are. "The children of Dinarzad are facing their own crises. They are obligated by their art to tell their stories well, and their sense of integrity demands that they tell them in truth" (Kaldas and Mattawa, 20). Telling their stories, within their own voices and frameworks offer Arab Americans a chance of healthy inclusion rather than complete assimilation that eventually leads to a monolithic vision of them as well as all others within the host country. Arab American literature does not only tackle the issue of assimilation, yet we have to acknowledge that such theme is a solid foundation that brings them together with other groups in America and opens for all political and cultural visions through which they can come together as one unit in the face of the one and only narration representing them within the American media and culture.

The editors compare Arab American authors to African American, Asian American and Latin American authors as an attempt to include Arab Americans in the conversation of cultures which Maria Mazziotti Gillan and her daughter Jennifer Gillan mention in the introduction of *Growing up Ethnic in America*. This anthology examines the variety of ethnic experiences within the American community and the conflicts of the dual identity faced by many ethnic groups. Issues of assimilation and marginalization often reveal the shared struggles between different ethnic groups. Likewise, Kaldas and Mattawa scrutinize these themes in each story shared within the Arab American community, pushing this dual identity to vocalize its existence through literature. Highlighting such political identity conversations between various groups within one host culture is crucial to the cause of articulating the Self and the authority to self-identification. Apparently, Arab Americans have disregarded such common ground with others and in a way limited themselves to two options; full assimilation or rejection of host culture. Alixa Naff highlights that "the silence surrounding Arab American lives may have been because many among them 'assimilated themselves out of existence'" (Kaldas and Mattawa, 25). To many like Naff, such assimilation is the fatal mistake that pushed Arab Americans out of the main narration and caused them to dissolve.

Such compatibility between ethnic and racial groups within the American society should not offer monolithic representation of the sociopolitical and cultural experiences of each group. The distinctive realities and experiences of these groups within American society and under its laws have to be preserved and highlighted particularly when the aim is to attract the attention towards what is common between them; the power of words. Establishing a comparison

between the stories documented by Arab American authors and those shared by Asian American, Jewish American, and Hispanic American authors and many others clarifies that most themes focus on the idea of assimilation and the struggles of constructing a dual identity. American authors with dual identities and different ethnic backgrounds often employ prose and art to defy complete assimilation and highlight its threats. Immigrant and Others within a host country frequently seek complete assimilation as a way of survival leading to a complete denial of their original culture. Others feel the cultural and psychological burden and thus tend to refuse the host country and shut the door in the face of any chance of assimilation. Unfortunately, host countries sometimes have a hand in eliminating any form of assimilation as they reject Others casting them as forever aliens. Through comparing the multiple faces of assimilation tackled in *Dinarzad's Children* and *Growing up Ethnic in America*, it is believed that the act of underlining the negative aspects of assimilation is itself a counter resisting act that anticipates positive assimilation for the Arab Americans. The kind of assimilation chosen by Arab American authors grants them a place among the recognized groups through joining in on the conversation. They become able to acculturate rather than assimilate; they hold on to their heritage and true Self through holding on to their traditions, while respecting and accepting the ways and culture of their host.

Initially, one of the issues discussed in *Dinarzad's Children* is the refusal of assimilation and the rejection of the host culture. In Mohja Kahf's "Manar of Hama," the protagonist struggles to assimilate herself into the new society she is exiled to. She faces a hard time adjusting or adapting to the new culture which she considers an alien to her traditions and principles. She cannot even grasp the language which she calls "miserable," chaotic," and a form of "mind-torture for foreigners and newcomers" (Kahf 111). She is also confounded by the fact her children are able to obtain it quickly unlike her. In other cases, she is aggressive towards the American food, way of life and ideals leading to a refusal of assimilation. Likewise in *Growing up Ethnic in America*, M. Gillan and J. Gillan give an example on such refusal through Amy Tan's "Rules of the Game." Though the story focuses on the gap between generations and cultures through the mother and daughter interactions, Waverly's mother in the story parallels Manar in this rejection of assimilation. She regularly criticizes the American ways while boosting the Chinese culture, revealing an inner rejection of the host culture. Despite the years, she continues to struggle with the language and often objects to her daughter becoming even a little bit Americanized considering it lazy and inefficient. Both authors voice their Syrian-American and Chinese-American identities which they try to rescue from the distortion of assimilation.

Opposite to the internal rejection of assimilation, there is the external rejection from the host culture causing ethnic groups to feel marginalized. In an entire section, *Dinarzad's Children* discusses the political and religious challenges facing Arab Americans as they attempt to assimilate. "It's Not About That" explores this idea as the protagonist gets rejected by her Jewish American lover. Her desire to form a relationship away from politics and religious issues is killed by 9/11 incident causing her to be marginalized and discriminated from a culture she has always thought she assimilated well into. In fact the mere idea of being with a white man and scrutinizing his looks and the "intensely blue, deep-set, quizzical" (Serageldin 279) eyes conveys her inner desire of assimilation which is not met at the end due to the sudden unexpected events. Correspondingly, *Growing up Ethnic in America* presents "American History" and the Latin American teenager striving to fit in a culture not hers in order to form a relationship with a white American neighbor. Politics is also apparent as the author includes Kennedy's death and how unaffected the protagonist is due to her lack of American historical and political information. She clearly declares "That night, I lay in my bed, trying to feel the right thing for our dead president. But the tears that came up from a deep source inside me were strictly for me" (Ortiz 104). By being close to the white boy, Skinny Bones, likewise the protagonist in "It's Not About That," expresses her subconscious desire of assimilation despite her otherness.

Nevertheless, it is believed that comparing Arab Americans to other ethnic groups is itself an act of positive integration as it opens a cultural and political venue for dual identities to unite under a communal and legal flag of 'Home'. Hence, they become able to speak up from the same point of power as Shahrazad did, dismantling the fear of being blinded by the idea of estrangement. Within the same light, *Growing up Ethnic in America* explains the desire to

speak out and write the silenced experiences of the ethnic communities while tackling alike thematic elements as those discussed in *Dinarzad's Children*. Adding to that, both anthologies are structured based on separate themes in order to guide the reader through a smooth reading process. The authors of *Growing up Ethnic in America* elaborate on this idea more by explaining that the stories from different cultures are only organized this way in order to "open a new space for cross-cultural conversations." (11) For diasporic identities, such conversations can lead towards healthy chances of assimilation, where none gets lost in the process or struggle to seek acknowledgment and voice. Kaldas and Mattawa using such division is their own method of bridging the gap between the multiple Arab experiences within the American community and, consequently, finding a place within the larger community of ethnic Americans.

Evelyn Shakir in her story "Oh, Lebanon" further explores this desire of assimilation as one wishes to escape one's own culture and totally assimilate to the host one. The reason behind the diminished and silenced Arab American literary experience within the framework of the American literature is attributed to the notion of neglecting one's original home culture and identity as Kaldas and Mattawa have mentioned in their introduction. The desire and yearning for total assimilation could perhaps refer to the negative feeling one has about his/her own culture, which, in fact, negatively impacts the literary role of the Arab Americans in literary production. In "Oh, Lebanon," the horrors of war have sparked up the need to escape one's own identity and cross to the next. However, this escape is not met easily and it leaves the protagonist at loss and confusion as she struggles to find out who she is. Thus, revealing the co-related struggle of assimilation which is the process of shaping one's identity in the host culture. Similarly, stories like "Magic" and "Looking for Work" in *Growing up Ethnic in America* deal with one's quest to fit in a 'Home'. The child in "Magic" is taken by Christmas and its lights, wondering why her Jewish family does not celebrate it. Her desire to abandon her religious identity and assimilate is clear as she compares Hanukkah within negative lights while still fascinated by Christmas' magic. This need for total assimilation is mostly apparent within the younger generations who are "influenced by the glimmers of the western world and show a tendency of snapping their roots with their cultural traditions" (Abiraami 155). The young kid in "Looking for Work" desires assimilation and wishes that his family can be like the ones he sees on TV. He believes the host culture is the norm and thus can only see his family's ways, culture and identity as bizarre and his survival is in running away from all that.

J. Abiraami states that "the urge to survive and succeed is a natural human impulse especially among the diasporic people," (Abiraami, 122). This human tendency to feel as a member of the host in-group is crucial for initial survival and acceptance within the new 'Home'. This of course does not suggest that complete assimilation can ease the pain of the diaspora. However, acculturation rather than assimilation can help build a solid grounds to create a unique cultural and ethnic community within the host country that will eventually help clarify realities about their homeland and their people whether back home or within the host settings. And as most of the stories collected in the selected anthologies focus on the complexity of assimilation rather than the positive aspects of diaspora, the focus of this study revolves around examining the cultural, political and spiritual struggles of assimilation represented by the voices of the authors collected in *Dinarzad's Children* and *Growing up Ethnic in America*. Through enduring the anxiety and fear of assimilation and finding a middle ground through acculturation, ethnic and diasporic bodies claim their right of voice and Self. They also penetrate the body of homogeneity within the host country and can dream of their own authority of their representations and identity. It is seen that acculturation, instead of assimilation, can offer a solid stance from which ethnic and diasporic groups in America, especially Arab Americans can guarantee a wider audience and a better representation within media and sociopolitical settings.

Conclusion

"as the immigrant finds himself perpetually at a transitional stage with memories of the original home which are at odds with the realities of the new world" (Abiraami 132), refugees and immigrants all over the world are haunted by stereotypes and racial repression. Arab Americans have a duty to speak up through the pen and hold it as the weapon with which they fight their fears and the fears of all others who question them. In *Dinarzad's Children*, the editors underscore that "Keeping their silence for a long time, Arab American storytellers have learned a great deal from their

African American, Asian American, and Latina sisters, the American Shahrazads who have sustained the integrity of their communities through their stories, letting the outside world into their world and providing a sense of community for their kin,” (20). Within our cultural memory, Shahrazad is remembered as the voice of ambition, intelligence and survival. I believe that she has dreamed of power and visibility and thus gambled on her own life and married Shahryar. As the daughter of a minister, she knows exactly the taste of authority, and as a woman under the ruling of Shahryar, she dreamed of Home’ from which she can avenge her deformed gender and write them down as heroes and survivals.

Unlike Shahrazad, Dinarzad is often remembered as silent, as her role was only to trigger Shahrazad to speak. She has no true contribution to the thousand and one stories which promoted Shahrazad as fighter and a true subject. Through writing and conscious assimilation, minorities can reach a status of visibility and mobility via the power of their stories. Arab Americans have to practice this heavenly gift of words and document their history and their identities. This is only possible as they speak up and write down their differences, originality and individuality. Acculturation rather than complete assimilation offers wider horizons for individuality. Arab Americans, just like other ethnic groups, need to claim their place and voice by strengthening the connection between where they come from and where they are now. This bridging can invite several cultural and critical conversations, revealing eventually their true identities and anchoring them deeper within the social, political and literal worlds they are part of.

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الانخراط مقابل الثقافة : الكتابة كمفترق طرق

هالة أبو طالب *

ملخص

بالنسبة للعديد من الأشخاص المنفيين وأبناء الشتات، يعد الاندماج ملاذاً آمناً يعتقدون أنه يمكنهم في ظله الهروب من مشاكل وآلام التمييز والقمع والعنصرية من خلال هذه المحاولات نادراً ما يفكر هؤلاء الأشخاص فيما سيجدون أنفسهم يقدمونه كمقابل لسعيهم وراء الاندماج الكامل. إن الصراعات اليومية، خارجية أم داخلية كانت، هي أمر لا يطاق ولكن محاولات الاندماج اللاواعي تزيد من مرارة وتشوه الهويات المزدوجة لهؤلاء الأشخاص. وتهدف هذه الورقة من خلال موازنة كتاب أطفال دينارزاد: مختارات من الخيال العربي المعاصر (2009) وكتاب النشأة العرقية في أمريكا: الخيال المعاصر حول تعلم أن تكون أمريكياً (1999) إلى تقديم الثقافة، أو، كما أرغب بالإشارة إليه، الاستيعاب الواعي كبديل لهذه المجموعات من الأشخاص وخاصة العرب الأمريكيين يمكن أن يساعدهم في الحفاظ على هوياتهم الحقيقية وأصواتهم الأصلية إلى جانب ذلك، يسلط هذا العمل الضوء على الحاجة الماسة بأن يقوم العرب الأمريكيين بالبحث عن مكان لهم ضمن العالم الأدبي الأمريكي وتوثيق شهاداتهم وزيادة رواياتهم من خلال مقارنة أوجه متنوعة من الأعمال الأدبية المختارة، وتشير هذه الدراسة إلى أن فعل المقارنة هذا هو أمر إيجابي وهو بحد ذاته شكل من أشكال الاندماج الواعي الذي يحث الهوية العربية الأمريكية على التعبير عن وجودها من خلال الأدب. أخيراً، تمهد هذه الورقة الطريق لعدد من الأسئلة المستقبلية والمزيد من الأبحاث التي تعزز الصواب السياسي من فكرة الثقافة وتؤكد على أهمية السرد الأدبي في الحفاظ على سلطة وأصالة الهويات المزدوجة، ولا سيما للأمريكيين العرب.

الكلمات الدالة: الانخراط التام، الثقافة، الهوية، علم الجمال.

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