



‘Praise to the Emptiness’ Locating Home in the Arab Diaspora

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Abstract

This paper explores the continuing negotiations which occur among the diasporic communities to arrive at definitions of home within the new geographical spaces occupied by them. Using the liminal and hybrid theories of Avtar Brah, Stuart Hall and their literary manifestations in Salman Rushdie and Meena Alexander, it explores the notion of home among the Arab diaspora in The United States, particularly as expressed by women writers. Using the specific example of Mohja Kahf's *the girl in the tangerine scarf*, this study examines the way in which Muslim women in the diaspora struggle to find multiple possibilities of 'home'. It presents the possibility that the inability to establish a final home could be a literary tool for the creative artist to examine multiple identities and inhabit marginal spaces in ways which are imaginative and hopeful rather than being zones of loss and longing.

Keywords: *the girl in the tangerine scarf*, Mohja Kahf, home, diaspora, Arab women writers, literature

1. Introduction

One of the most endearing narratives of the diasporic experiences in history is the Zoroastrian movement from Persia, fearing persecution by the Arabs around 641 CE. Arriving to the western shores of India, these travelers sought refuge under the Hindu kingdom of King Jadhav Rana. The anecdote goes on to say that the king sent them a bowl full of milk to show that the kingdom was full and could not accommodate more people. Upon receiving this bowl, the migrants added sugar to the milk and sent it back; meaning to show that they would dissolve into the milk without affecting its quality in any way, and, if at all, they would in fact, sweeten the milk, in this case, the new land (Pocha, 2007).

Such essentialist notions of diaspora have long been problematized and in fact questioned if not rejected outright in favor of more painful, nostalgic metanarratives of loss, displacement and memory that frame contemporary discourses on diaspora. These are aptly expressed, in part, by Meena Alexander, a poet who has seen numerous homes and for whom travelling represents a form of increasing alienation and marginalization: "I am a woman cracked by multiple migrations. Uprooted so many times she can connect nothing with nothing" (Alexander, 1993:3). This is echoed by reminiscences by writers like Lisa Majaj who reminds herself and others that who she is, is fundamentally connected to the land she has left behind: "I am the wheat stalk, and I am/the olive. I am plowed fields young/with the music of crickets,/I am ancient earth struggling/to bear history's fruit," she asserts in a poem entitled 'Claims' (Kadi, 1994:84).

These early expressions of diaspora which codified and privileged notions of loss and displacement read the experience of travel and living in a new homeland in terms of a metaphysical conflict of geographical space and subjective expressions of a shared experience. This is part of the literature of loss as expressed in works like *Arabian Jazz* by Diana Abu-Jaber or the anthology of reminiscing narratives *Food for our Grandmothers* edited by Joanna Kadi. It is also part of the wider group of diasporic writers such as Bharati Mukherjee, Amy Tan and Maxine Kingston for whom the land left behind is not only fertile, pure and ripe with possibilities but is in fact capable of standing up to the vagaries of the present day home. May Mansor Munn finds this to be true in her piece 'Homecoming' where she invokes the purity of the land she had left behind, Ramallah: "Once in this place of memory, shops opened mornings and afternoons, stone walls and buildings were free of politics, and instead of gunfire, the honking of cars disrupted equilibrium in the streets" (Kadi: 94).

2. Understanding home and diaspora: Emerging contexts

Diaspora with its attendant associations of loss, displacement and the reality of marginal existence are, of course part of the historical metanarrative of travel and migration as shown by Paul Gilroy's studies of black American experience of slavery and even Stuart Hall's depictions of Caribbean experience in America. In this sense, emigration, exile and diaspora in its many forms have seen various avatars and transformations in the last few decades. The trajectory of diaspora studies have ranged from the collective acknowledgment of an 'old country' emphasizing notions of memory, displacement and marginality as expressed in Safran's (1991) use of scattering and original community memory and

Cohen's focus on "the positive virtues of retaining a diasporic identity" (Cohen, 2008: 7). To this notion of travel and identity is also added Stuart Hall's exploration of the various 'routes' the diasporic journey must take to create home from the untold stories of the past:

This is the Africa we must return to – but by another "route": What Africa has become in the New World, what we have made of "Africa": "Africa" – as we retell it through politics, memory and desire (Hall, 1999: 242).

Into this discourse of memory and exile, of course, is added the "baggage of memories and land left behind" (Rushdie, 1992: 19) that Salman Rushdie had so well caught and exemplified in his depiction of exilic experience in *Imaginary Homelands*. The notion that homelessness could be celebrated, exulted in and become itself a site for imagination and creativity was a position which soon became popular with immigrant writers for whom home did not only stand for the ideal 'other' but also second and third generation migrant children whose memories of home were largely numbed by the succession of years and increasing emotional distance from the land left behind. Rushdie expresses this famously when he says:

Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures: at other times that we fall between two stools. But however ambiguous and shifting this ground may be, it is not infertile territory for a writer to occupy (Rushdie, 1992: 19).

This is taken up by critics like Chelvia Kanaganayakam for whom the distance and imagination that exile and immigration provides is not only ripe, but in fact absolutely imperative for the literary imagination. Exile, in this sense, becomes a literary trope to explore life in the margins, and within exile, home must be created. As he states in an early essay on Michael Ondaatje: "If the experience of exile inevitably involves division, it also affords the perception of complex connections that question and subvert prevailing structures" (Kanaganayakam, 1992: 34).

Discourse on diasporic identities and homeland become more layered and complex when set in the context of the Middle East, not least owing to the historical associations of the term 'diaspora' with the scattering of the Jewish community in biblical times. The Arab diaspora that resulted from the return of the Jews to this part of the world remains largely unexplored for its literary possibilities. Layla Al-Maleh begins her introduction to a collection of essays by saying that "[t]he irony of Anglophone Arab literature is that it did not gain attention or attain recognition until the world woke up one day to the horror of the infamous 9/11, and asked itself who those 'Arabs' really were" (Al-Maleh, 2009: 2). As Evelyn Shakir suggests, the focus on Arab-American writing has primarily been on the iconic writers of the early part of the twentieth century who were primarily trying to integrate into American society by showing, for example, "that Syrians were not so alien, after all" (Shakir, 1997: 9). The women's narratives of diaspora remained largely silent until Shakir's *Bint Arab* brought focus to the untold tales of the new immigrants seen through the eyes of a diverse variety of women whose struggle with the question of who they really were identified much of their experience in America. As she explains: "But once they come to this country, a great silence descends. Very little is available on what happens to them (or happened to their predecessors) and even less on the lives of their daughters" (10). According to her, much of the conflict for the Arab Americans continues to be the "tug of war between attachment to the land of their birth (the United States) and anger or frustration at American policies in the Middle East. Though men also face these conflicts, they take on special meaning for women, female and Arab, they may feel doubly victimized" (10).

This conflict is further explored by critics like Layla Al Maleh who examines the way in which Arab women writers like Faqir, Soueif, Ghandour and Abuleila have used their individual migrations to explore political and social realities. Diaspora, in this sense, is an essential condition for exploration and criticism. Maleh concludes that "Diasporic experience certainly leaves its powerful imprint on this literature, and the authors use it to offer their own reformulations of culture and subjectivity. No longer beholden to the dictates of the 'home' community, they benefit from their positions as 'outsiders/insiders' and enter into a dialogue with past and present, the distant and the near" (Maleh, 2009: 15). Equally, home is thus an entity from which one can escape, but it is not always a home to which one creatively and consciously arrives. In this sense, home is at once a literary trope with nostalgic, essentialist possibilities, but it is also that which is sought out without much success. According to Barbara Lampert, "[t]here seems to be a greater sense of security and stability in migratory subjectivity than in a nostalgic search for a mythic home. In much of the literature, there is little desire to return, despite the fact that many aspects of life in the host community are not as they were in the original community" (26).

3. Exploring home in Arab literature

The positioning of home in the consciousness of the diasporas has been a central point of concern for the exiles and refugees and émigrés for whom the nostalgic catapulting triggers memories at once beautiful and evocative of innocence and an Edenic sense of simplicity and conformity. Theresa Saliba narrates a conversation with her grandmother: "Was Lebanon beautiful? 'Yelee!' she said, then lapsed into memories and ramblings in Arabic, the only language that could express her country's beauty. Every time I wanted to experience Lebanon, she lapsed into sounds I could not decipher, as if a country cannot be translated to any other language except that which is native to it" (Kadi, 1994: 11). This is also reflected in Kadi's own explanation of the title of her anthology, *Food for Our Grandmothers*: "Reading through a pile of manuscripts that had recently arrived in the mail, I was struck by the incredible number of them centering around our grandmothers and what they had given us'. She goes on to reflect that "there are things I once took for granted whose

beauty, endurance and usefulness now astound me. Thankfully I am at a point in my life where I did not take the following stories for granted" (24).

In the meanwhile, home continues to inhabit a privileged space, not because the essentialist notions of belonging and identity are possible within the framework of this symbol, but because it itself becomes a symbol for what the diaspora may seek to express. As Avtar Brah asks:

Where is home? On the one hand 'home' is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense, it is a place of no return, even if it is impossible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of 'origin'. On the other hand, home is also the lived experience of a locality. Its sounds and smells, its heat and dust, balmy summer evenings...all this, as mediated by the historically specific everyday of social relations (Brah, 1996: 192).

It has thus become the endeavor of the immigrant 'other' to negotiate between the nostalgic versions of the land left behind with its accompanying associations of loss, memory and displacement with the more interactive possibility of turning this very border into a site for imagination, privileging itself into a position where exile itself becomes a site of knowledge, of creative possibilities and where the immigrant becomes uniquely gifted –gifted with the ability to straddle two different, often opposing worlds. This is the overlapping area made so relevant and popular by Homi Bhaba as the 'third space': "For me the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the 'third space', which enables other positions to emerge" (Bhaba, 1994: 211). In Bhaba, hybridity is of course the unique position diametrically opposing the essentialism of exile and fixed identities. In terms of finding home, Lampert links the effort with the inevitable realization that 'home' too, is often created in these spaces of the in-between and often, not a fixed reality. Speaking of the writings of Diane Abu-Jaber, Rachlin and Mohja Kahf she says: "These author's insightful, though understudied texts demonstrate why the desire for home is no longer an external search, but rather internal, individual, and more importantly, invented. In these texts, home is imagined, geographically, it exists nowhere" (Lampert, 2008: 4).

While the intricacies of reading between hybridity, diaspora and ethnicity are confronted and sought to be hammered into an underlying fixity, a closer look at a representative work of this diasporic experience may reveal something of the notion of home that is increasingly becoming part of the narrative of hybrid existence. Mohja Kahf is a second generation immigrant whose parents had migrated to America while they were children. Her assumption of the form of the *bildungsroman*, of growing up to adulthood in America as the central agency for her narratives on the diaspora, as she continually exhorts in the marginality of her existence provides much of the distance required to grow as a writer. Mohja Kahf's appropriation of being homeless is immediately declared in the title to the section dedicated to her in Susan Muaddi Darraj's *Scheherazade's Legacy*, "Poetry is my Home Address". Kahf here describes the influences she had as a growing writer and cites the example of Ghanaian writer Abena Busia who once performed in traditional Ghanaian dress, inspiring her, she says, to perform her own poetry unabashedly, being 'that immigrant-princess-diva-poet I so love to be at times' (Darraj, 2004: 14). But it is in her most defining fiction that the search for the meanings of home and the resultant quest to find a meaningful center spurs the characters to confront the complexities of their existence and establish a version of home within that third-space of belonging and identity.

4. Exploring migration: Mohja Kahf's literary creations

Mohja Kahf's involvement with the diasporic experience and her subsequent quest for the implications of the home and not-home are etched out in her early collection of poems entitled *E-mails from Scheredzade* in which she examines the space that exists between Arabs and Americans. Clearly, America has not become home to many of the Arabs, nor is the terse relationship between the host nation and the immigrants easily solved. Kahf's own attitude to her native country Syria is ambivalent at best: "Syria is saving some cherries/In a bowl for me.../I am sure that if I went back to Syria/there would be music,/and all the melodrama of a Hindi movie" (Kahf, 2003: 42). The call of the native country and the detachment which the persona desires seem at odds with each other, the tension finally remaining unresolved in spite of the absence of any real relationship between the poet and the host nation. Home, it appears from this collection, is not going to be made very easily.

It is a site that is familiar to Khadra, Mohja Kahf's Syrian protagonist in *the Girl in the tangerine scarf*. Struggling as she is with the twin forces of parental expectations with its associated conservatism and her flirtations with varying forms of Islam at different stages of her youth, Khadra symbolically represents the struggle, not only of Islam but more particularly, of Muslim women growing up in America. The daughter of Dawa representatives at Indianapolis, Khadra's experiences show the oxymoronic condition of calling a place of avoidance and sin, home; of crying with disappointment at being forced to take on American citizenship, of being made to belong to a land she seems to have been unwillingly brought to and in which she has to carefully negotiate the realities of her life. When caught playing with some boys her mother screams, "Do you think we are American? Do you think we leave our children wandering in the streets? Is that what you think we are? Then she burst into sobs" (Kahf, 2006: 66).

This apparent contradiction as voiced by Khadra's mother encapsulates the notion of living away from home, a condition resented, and yet, unchangeable in the eyes of the Wajdys for whom America will always remain a place of sin and moral corruption. All around Khadra, the predominant note is that of danger and suspicion. Khadra is thus made to trapeze delicately between the two realities of America the way it is according to the picture painted by her parents

and the memory of another land that could be – a religious land of purity that the Dawah center was trying to emulate in the new country. "Anger lurked everywhere," the young Khadra is warned when, as a child, she innocently eats a candy that she is told has pig in it: "And it was too late to throw it up. Khadra was tainted forever. If she lived, that is. Too ashamed to tell her parents, she waited in horror for the bugs to grow in her stomach and eat her guts out" (13). It is from this vantage of literal visions of Islamic code that Khadra grows, experimenting and, very often, assuming the righteousness of her faith – a faith that is not yet tested against the realities of dialogue and questioning.

Inevitably, the veil plays a significant role in her own *bildungsroman*, the abandoning of it never a real option but the tightening and blackening of it expressing much of the literal nostalgia characteristic of the diaspora. It requires a physical journey to the roots, a pilgrimage to Mecca where the family hopes to discover the purest form of Islam that she gets her rudest shock. By not being able to pray and by having her pristine experience of prayer destroyed by the advances of young Saudi boys who accuse her of being a prude as they try to flirt with her in the desert beyond their homes, she realizes that the spiritual home was couched in corruption and ruin and that Mecca could never exist as a center of her being. Khadra returns with a devastated vision of the Islam she has so long harbored respect for and had been taught to emulate:

Khadra was glad to be going home. 'Home' - she said, without thinking. She pressed her nose against the airplane window. The lights if Indianapolis spread out on the dark earth beneath the jet. The sweet relief of her own clean bed awaited her there – and only there, of all the earth (177).

This assimilative tendency that responds to the shock of disappointment and the collapse of hitherto cherished values, however, cannot last long as it does not completely justify the role Khadra seeks out for herself as the hyphenated American. With her subsequent marriage to a Kuwaiti student who objects to her riding a bicycle as being unfeminine to her choice of abortion as a solution to her failing marriage, Khadra's choices are couched in a realm that is personal yet political and religious at the same time. Her acceptance of Juma's proposal is taken as an opportunity to find 'home', at this moment, still seen as a physical reality in terms of a return. She does marry and briefly go to Kuwait but finds that the home of her in-laws evokes none of the sense of pleasure and peace she had hoped to achieve through marriage: "Khadra realized with a start that she (her mother in-law) was referring to the house in the family compound that would be Juma's when he returned. 'ours, when we return' she mentally corrected herself" (220).

It is at this time of emotional abyss ("Where do you go when the first part of your life is coming to an end, and you don't know what is yet unborn...?) that Khadra chooses to go back to Syria in search of emotional and personal fulfillment and meaning, having rejected, and having been rejected by the twin forces of separation and assimilation. Her stay in Syria with her aunt Teta is, in a sense, her search for roots. This quest introduces her, not only to her parents' disturbing past but also to the mythic poet friend who, apart from being her own alter ego, challenges her deeply ingrained assumptions and forces her to see beyond the immediate contradictions of her life:

You still think of God as some Big Parent in the Sky, don't you? He demanded. Again, she was surprised at how he seemed to be able to speak right into her mind's conversation. 'Waiting with a logbook of all your misdeeds to punish or reward you? All those hoary ancient guilt trips and self-flagellations for such a tired notion. Not worth a Syrian dime.

'But then what? Without that, I'm lost' she protested.

'Be lost then. Better lost than false.' (192)

Khadra's return to America appears to be couched in terms that reveal not only her openness to experiments but also the acceptance of multiple realities that oppose her Dawah existence. Oscillating between the two furthest points of religious renewal, she chooses to not-choose. With an array of Islamic variations from her husband's conservative brand of patriarchy and her friend Joy's form of experimental Islam, through the sufi and Iranian versions, Khadra opens out and chooses to leave the entire experience unresolved and unanswered, leaving the road to further exploration. The lasting image of the novel is couched in terms of a car race – itself a revolutionary gesture but one that entwines Khadra's future and her realization of an embrace that is open and, in her worlds, of pure surrender: "Is she out of the race? No!- she's back cries the announcer. She's regrouping – I'm regrouping too, Khadra thinks with elation and is full of gratitude..." (444). Her choice of photography as her vocation also rises from her ability to read between the hyphens, recognizing the contradictions that have become an important part of her life.

5. Conclusion

Going back to a literal home or its imaginary equivalents posits the notion of belonging into the contested site of diaspora. . The possibilities that journeys provide are only modes of expression and articulation, of taking a position, or perhaps of deliberately not taking one, an act that makes the occupation of the third space at once real and compelling. In spite of the layering of immigrant experience, it is inevitable that a position be taken, however, of being an insider looking outward and backward or being the privileged outsider with knowledge of the inside. Being Janus-faced and being able to assume the vacuity of marginal existence and turn it into an eloquent space that empowers and enlightens may be a possible way out of the binaries of inside and outside, marginal and center, but it is not without its problems. The repercussions of such hybrid identities have not been sufficiently noted, for the tendency to retain a vacuum in the third space, of leaving the alternatives so open as to make a kind of homecoming implausible is a consideration that the

literature of the diaspora will have to contend with. In the meanwhile, what emerges most successfully in this novel is the notion of homelessness as a literary trope, one that enables the artist to exult in the very act of not-belonging and see, within that vacuum, the possibilities for a newer kind of life and home.

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