



Born out of Struggle: Space and Trauma in Arab-American literature

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Abstract

The magnitude of the September 11 attacks continues to resonate in literature, even after more than two decades. The aftermath of the deadly attacks have heavily affected the socio-political climate and raised the tension between the East and the West. This paper focuses on how since 9/11 the discursive presence in America (and perhaps the West more generally) of Arab-Americans and Muslims more generally has significantly shifted. More specifically, the way, in which Arabs have gone from “white” to non-white, seemingly overnight. With a psychoanalytic approach, and more precisely, the trauma theory, I argue how the dominant discourse generated from the west, after 9/11, has neglected the moral and traumatic consequences it had on Muslims and Arabs. The grand narrative the dominated the media and the writings of many prominent western intellectuals, whether it is fiction or nonfiction, had widened the gap between Muslims and non-Muslims living in the US. So, in this paper, I shed some light on the limitation of language, especially on how trauma tended to be overlooked when it comes to Arabs and Muslims. The focus of this paper, then, is to read the works of Arab-American writers in light of this dialectical exchange between the geopolitical power structure and the 9/11 narrative.

Keywords

trauma, Arab-American, oppressed, world literature, 9/11 attacks.

1. Introduction

Since the event of September 11, Arab-Americans, and Muslims in general, became hypervisible objects in America’s cultural mainstream. Monolithic stereotypical representations of Muslims ran rampant across various expressive

platforms. The aftermath of the tragedy did not limit itself to producing a discourse of oriental representations; neo-imperial reactions were also triggered. These neo-imperial geopolitics, led by the United States government, specifically its supposed war against terrorism, have shattered regions of the Arab world and left many killed or displaced. The war on terror covers a long historical and political ambitions of the United States in the Middle East. The postcolonial critic Neil Lazarus (2006) claims that the redemptive violence that has been invoked since the event has effectively replaced other major historical precedents of the 20th century. An event of this gravity influenced how we perceived the world around us, and the body of literature that constitutes a discourse surrounding the event testifies to that influence. The event itself and its aftermath have led to a collective traumatic experience on both ends. The tragedy is represented as a moment of historical rupture by western writers. To give testimony to the pain caused by the event, shattered and fragmented narratives have been appropriated by fictional writers in order to attempt to describe an ineffable traumatic experience. Judith Butler (2006) in *Precarious Life* points out that the collective experience of a cataclysmic event tends to emerge from a particular narrative frame. It is the same frame that can either open up or preclude "certain kinds of questions, certain kinds of historical inquires". Ultimately, it is also this very narrative frame that determines whether "the experience of violence and loss have to lead straightaway to military violence and retribution" or whether "something can be made of grief besides a cry for war" (27). It is safe to say that writers attempting to describe event have found themselves in a crisis of representation as they have unsuccessfully tried to create a narrative could be used to explore the central tenets of the tragedy.

Richard Gray (2018) affirms that "if there was one thing writers agreed upon in response to 9/11, it was the failure of language; the terrorist attacks made the tools of their trade seem absurd" (32). The failure of language is addressed by several critics, including Catherine Morley (2008), who argues that the event has produced a new form of narrative realism. "A form of realism," she claims, "born of a frustration with the limits of language as an affective and representative tool" (7). These critiques of the failure of language to authentically capture the gravity of the tragedy have been directed towards western writers whom their protagonists (mainly white Americans) exemplified their authors' inability to reflect upon the social and political consequences of ignoring the cultural other. Peter Morey (2019) points out how cultural difference, "so long a vaunted property of peoples claiming their right to recognition and empowerment within the multicultural nation of the west," is now "constructed as cause (and legitimation) of violence" (3). Western narratives have neglected the moral binarism (with us or against us) and the globalized structure of power, focusing instead on particular trauma and what Cathy Caruth (2016) calls "narrative memories" of individual suffering. The focus of this paper, then, is to read the works of Arab-American writers in light of this dialectical exchange between the geopolitical power structure and the 9/11 narrative. As is has been pointed out by few critics, the failure of post 9/11 western narratives is

due to their attempt to assimilate the unfamiliar into familiar narrative structures (Rothberg, 2008). The same narrative structure that has been characterized by its overshadowing of the empire's reach into the eastern world, which in turn blinds its citizens from grasping the imperial destruction done in the Third World. The Arab-American writers, I argue, undermine the grand narrative of post 9/11 literature through articulating their own trauma narratives. Arab-Americans authors represent a way of maintaining the memories of guilt, exploitation, and racism that continue to resonate in contemporary western societies. These narratives tend to traverse historical and geographical situations in order to reflect transgenerational experiences.

2. Body of Paper

The failure of the traumatic language of 9/11 to include the social other speaks to an ongoing dilemma in the dialogue between postcolonialism and trauma theory, in the fact that the latter is of Eurocentric orientation. The epistemological framework was laid out during the 1990s by the founding figure Cathy Caruth (1996). Caruth's approach is marked by its grounding in the Freudian psychoanalysis, which offers a problematic set of emotional and psychological relationships with the past. The Freudian understanding of trauma links core concepts of neuroses with memory and the fact that memory rejects temporal linearity is problematic in the postcolonial context since it leads to the "unspeakability" of the originating traumatic event. This notion of unspeakability is at odds with the postcolonialism's imperative to reveal and disclose hidden histories of marginalization, oppression, and exploitation. Many postcolonial critics tackled this problem in an attempt to "decolonize" trauma theory.

Caruth (2016) argues in *Unclaimed Experience* that our engagement with trauma theory demands a new mode of reading and listening that helps break the isolation imposed on both the individual and the cultures. She claims that trauma can provide us with unique access to history "Through the notion of trauma [...] we can understand that a rethinking of reference is aimed not at eliminating history but at resituating it in our understanding, that is, at precisely permitting history to arise where immediate understanding may not" (16). She conceives history to be inherently traumatic which proves to be problematic. Stef Craps (2012) argues in his book *Postcolonial Witnessing* that the founding texts of the field, including Caruth's work, largely fail to live up to this promise of cross-cultural ethical engagement. For him, they fail on four different accounts:

they marginalize or ignore traumatic experiences of non-Western or minority cultures, they tend to take for granted the universal validity of definitions of trauma and recovery that have developed out of the history of Western modernity, they often favour or even prescribe a modernist aesthetic of fragmentation and aporia as uniquely suited to the task of bearing witness to trauma, and they generally disregard the connections between metropolitan and non-Western or minority traumas. (11)

For Craps (2011), the current framework of trauma theory risks assisting in

perpetuating the same beliefs, practices, and structures that maintain existing injustices and inequalities. Craps, among others, aims to help trauma studies achieve its self-declared ethical claim.

On a similar note, Laura Brown argues in "Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma" introduces what she terms "the private, secret, *insidious traumata*" (Brown, 1991). She provides a feminist analysis and critique of traditional mental health disciplines. The term *insidious traumata* refer to the traumatic situation involving people of color, lower class people, people with disabilities, and other marginalized groups. By coining the term, Brown insists on expanding our understanding of the term trauma that tended to privilege the experiences of dominant groups to *insidious trauma*, which specifically refers to "the traumatogenic effects of oppression that are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to bodily well-being at the given moment, but which do violence to the soul and spirit" (Dent, 2020). Perhaps the best example to explain what Brown refers to as *insidious trauma* that is not necessarily physically threatening is Frantz Fanon (1968) often cited account of encountering racial prejudice in his book *Black Skin, White Masks*, where he is objectively demonized by a frightened white boy who reduces him "into nonbeing". An event that had, figuratively, "amputated" him and left him "completely dislocated" (5).

Furthermore, in attempting to make trauma studies confront its Eurocentric blind spots, Michael Rothberg (2008) in "Decolonizing Trauma Studies: A Response," draws attention to the (post)colonial trauma and narrative. He questions whether "trauma provides the best framework for thinking about the legacies of violence in the colonized/postcolonial world" (226). Additionally, Rothberg searches out the productive medium between the "hyper-particularism or hyper-localism" called for by some postcolonial trauma specialists (229) and the "over-homogenization" that is the typical, regrettable tendency in trauma studies thus far (229). A medium he hopes to locate through consideration of "the multidirectionality of collective memory" (Rothberg 2013). It seems, then, that the task is not a simple broadening of the scope of trauma studies, but also critically examining dominant conceptions of trauma and recovery. As Fanon (1968) notes in his critique of the Freudian psychoanalytic paradigm by stating, "Psychoanalytic schools have studied the neurotic reactions that arise among certain groups, in certain areas of civilization. In response to the requirements of dialectic, one should investigate the extent to which the conclusions of Freud or of Adler can be applied to the effort to understand the man of color's view of the world". This early critique shows, from anti-colonial perspective, how trauma studies is steeped in a long history of Eurocentric thought. By examining the marginalized literature of Arab-American authors, I aim to shed light on the cultural production of these texts, which reveals the painful histories behind it. These writers negotiate notions of identity and belonging with their western counterparts. Then, decolonizing trauma studies would allow for new understandings and manifestations of trauma in literary texts. One that does not adhere to Caruth's universalizing model of dealing with trauma.

The failure of language, I argue, in the post 9/11 western novels can be attributed to the same problematic set of limitations in trauma studies. For example, taking the most well-known post 9/11 novel, Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007). There are two critiques of DeLillo's work that I want to focus on here in order to show the novel's failure to bridge the gap of cross-cultural ethical engagement. Given the wide attention the novel received, it has undoubtedly succeeded in capturing the consequences of the attack on the psychic level. Presenting trauma on the psychic level, however, risks reducing it to a domestic concern. That is, it becomes a pull away from the larger events related to the attack in our world into domesticity. As Jeffrey Alexander (2004) points out in "Towards a Theory of Cultural Trauma," there are two ways of presenting trauma in literary texts. The psychic trauma, also known as individual trauma, affects the individual's mind in a wound-like inflicted pain that breaks the sufferer's experience of time and self. On the other hand, cultural trauma is "first of all an empirical, scientific concept, suggesting new meaningful and causal relationships between previously unrelated events, structures, perceptions, and actions" (18). Furthermore, this definition of cultural trauma "illuminates new emerging domain of social responsibility and political action" (19). DeLillo's novel deals with the personal trauma of its protagonist, which in turn not only fails to engage in the broader social responsibility towards the cultural other, but also perpetuates Islamophobic stereotypes that add to the suffering of internal minority groups (Arab-Americans and Muslim Americans in general).

In "Alterity and the Radical Other in Post-9/11 Fiction: DeLillo's *Falling Man* and Walter's *The Zero*," Aaron Derosa (2013) criticizes DeLillo's novel for its inability "to distinguish between the fundamentalist other and otherness in general, a conflation that has led to problematic equivalencies in post-9/11 discourse" (69). In a scattered two chapters of the novel, DeLillo introduces the reader to the story of Hammad, the cultural other who is one of the main hijackers. He is barely given voice in the novel and characterized in a way that meets the convenient western model of the radical Muslim. He was at some point in his life a soldier taking part in jihadist group in Afghanistan and adopts the stereotypical rhetoric of "Islam is the struggle against the enemy, near enemy and far, Jews first, for all things unjust and hateful, and then the Americans" (DeLillo 2007). As Spivak and Said have noted, the political voice of a westerner in representations of the other is problematic. By adopting the binary dichotomies of "us vs. them" or "West vs. Islam," DeLillo creates a fertile environment for Islamophobic interpretations based on the presence of these two contradictory worlds. Indeed, *Falling Man* is an example of a novel where western representations of individual trauma are at a juncture with representing otherness.

Many Arab-American writers responded to the binary and exclusionary political rhetoric adopted by the Bush administration after 9/11. The subsequent backlash included detentions, deportations, and the formation of global black sites. Thus, one could argue that the hyphenated term "Arab-American" is constructed

as a political marker rather than an ethnic one. Race theorists Michael Omi and Howard Winant's (2014) study on racial formation proves beneficial to my approach since it emphasizes the social nature of race and the flexibility meanings and categories. In their view, race was and will always be the center of American experience. They discuss how concepts of race came to be and how they developed in a socially constructed racial paradigm. Arab-Americans were mainly considered "white" and barely had a distinctive presence in the racial paradigm of the United States prior to 9/11. That quickly changed after the tragedy, as they are no longer white and became hypervisible subjects in media outlets. The political escalation following the war on terror and aggressive foreign policies have turned Arab-Americans into culturally colored citizens. I believe the racial formation of the Arab-American identity is best understood with Omi and Winant's (2014) description of "internal colonialism." Deriving from cultural nationalism, racialized groups living in the United States link their struggle with those of cultural domination and racial oppression for the purpose of promoting collective identity for the oppressed. They characterize internal colonialism as the "approaches attempted [to] the synthesis of different aspects of racial oppression: economic, political, and cultural, through the invocation of a colonial model. In most cases, they appealed as well to nationalist forms of mobilization against this generalized system of oppression" (53). Tracing the formation of Arab-American identity, and the socio-political history behind it, would reveal that it is bound by collective traumatic experiences of forced displacement, oppression, and guilt.

It is safe to say that Arab and Arab-American authors have been living in a vicious circle of political hardships that left them dislocated and forced to migrate from home. Their identities have gone through three historical events that shaped it as it is now. That is, a political identity manifested itself in the writings of these authors. A brief overview of the historical periods would allow for a better understanding of how the Arab identity was born out of struggle. The historian Gerogry Orfalea proposes in his book *The Arab Americans: A History* (2006) a three-wave model of immigrants: 1870s- 1924, 1940- 67, and 1967 to the present. Other historians have provided different models, but I believe this is the more accurate one since it captures the major political events that caused their migrations. The earliest wave of migrants in the early twentieth century is known as *Mahjar* (Arabic for migrant). The majority of these migrants and exiles were Christians from Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, and Jordan. It is believed that 95,000 people migrated during that time and many factors participated in the mass exodus. Including the persecution of Arab Christians by the Ottoman Empire who used to rule the northern region of the middle east. And the decision of the Ottoman Empire to participate in the First World War which increased the military conscription of men from the region. Due to these reasons, many have been exiled or forced to migrate to the United States and among them were prominent names in the Arab literary production. These intellectuals founded the "Pen-League," a literary society where they began a tradition of Arab American writings. They played

a vital role in the Arab subject formation in the west because their literary tradition continued to be adopted by a wide range of authors throughout the twentieth century. Their diaspora writings include themes of the trauma and the loss of homeland. Without giving a detailed analysis of their literary production, for that to be a task for a bigger project, *Mahjar* writers like Ameen Rihani and Khalil Gibran have established a transnational literary tradition that influenced several generations of Arab-American writers. The literary movement of *Mahjar* aimed to synthesize what they viewed as the "East" and "West." To that end, many of their poetry is used to symbolically heal the traumatic legacies of migrations and losing one's home. Some of them sojourned in the United States with the full intention of returning home one day, except, for some, that day never came.

In the 1960s, two significant events caused the third and most historically significant migration to happen. Following the U.S. Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which eliminated national origin, race, and ancestry as the basis for immigration, many Arabs found it possible to migrate to the United States. Many of these immigrants were escaping the Six-Day Arab-Israeli War of 1967. Lisa Suhair Majaj (2008) in "Arab-American Literature: Origins and Developments" sheds light on the third wave of immigrants. She writes:

These immigrants, who were from a variety of countries, frequently Muslim, and often better educated and more politically engaged than earlier immigrants had been, stimulated settled Arab-Americans to engage more directly with Arab culture and politics. Meanwhile, political events, from the 1967 war to 9-11 and beyond, forced Arab-Americans to grapple with their identity and with the "write or be written" imperative: Define yourself or others will define you. (22)

Indeed, the liberalization of immigration laws and the shock from war defeat of the Arab states have stirred the Arab-Americans to grapple with their identities. As a consequence, Majaj (2008) points out that both the new arrivals and third generation of the first immigrants began to work for their ethnic communities and the socio-political traumas of their people in the Arab countries.

Zahia Salhi and Ian Richard Netton's (2011) edited collection puts forward a nuanced discussion of literary works produced by Arab writers in the diaspora. In the introduction, Salhi alerts us to the fact that we should make a distinction between the "various categories of the members of the Arab Diaspora [. . .] exiles, refugees, expatriates, and émigrés." Exiles, Salhi maintains, "keep an idealized image of home as a paradise they were forced to flee [. . .] They share feelings of solitude, estrangement, loss, and longing" (12). Salhi (2011) makes some useful observations about the collective traumatic nature of displacement and dislocation. Indeed, many of these immigrants became advocates for the Palestinian cause and engaged in political writings describing the shock of losing the war and Palestinian territories to Israel. They protested against the supposed unlawful occupation and displacement of Palestinians. The literature produced during this time can be more classified as resistance literature since the writers of this era were concerned with finding agency that resists the oppression of the Palestinian people. The aftermath

of the Arab-Israeli War has led to the creation of several Arab-American activist groups that fought against the discrimination in the media and academia and called for a more balanced U.S/Middle East foreign policy. And the Palestinian cause is an example of the transgenerational trauma that still resonates in the minds of many Arabs and Arab-Americans.

The Arab-American identity was, and arguably still is, a responsive one. That is, it reacts to the never-ending political tension surrounding it, whether that be in their original homeland or in the west. The tragedy of 9/11 and its subsequent backlash has aggravated what became a latent literature of resistance. Meaning that, at the end of the twentieth century, many Arab-Americans were assimilating into the American culture by claiming their whiteness. As Majaj (2008) points out, many "Arab-Americans went so far in the assimilation process that some historians have described them as being in danger of assimilating themselves out of existence" (6). However, after the attacks of 9/11, any claim or desire for assimilation was removed. Instead of denying or escaping their Arabness, many Arab-American authors have embraced their new hypervisible political identity. Writers who have embraced this identity made the conscious decision to produce their work from this posture. In doing so, they confront issues such as racial profiling, government prosecution, and black sites. The political trauma(s) of 9/11 and the war on terrorism play a fundamental component in the literary production of Arab-Americans.

Many writers have expressed their shock after the 9/11 attacks, whether in fiction or nonfiction style. I will limit myself in this paper to one poem, "first writing since" by Suhier Hammad (2003). Hammad's poem breaks the Arab-American silence through a spontaneous poetic burst. In fact, it is the first poem to circulate the internet by an Arab-American writer soon after the attack. Her poem, which reads as resistance literature, tries to create a shared cross-cultural structure of feeling that, as Caruth (2016) suggests, has the possibility to forge links between cultures. Hammad (2003) adopts a communal identity to capture the trauma of Arab-Americans. The unspeakability of the event is represented in the title, as the author is incapable of completing the sentence. However, Hammad is very aware of the danger of silence during such a sensitive time, so she decides to write back to the dominant media outlets that were quickly to demonize all Arabs and Muslims. A rhetoric that was quickly adopted by the American public:

ricardo on the radio said in his accent thick as yuca, 'i will feel so much better when the first bombs drop over there. and my friends feel the same way.' on my block, a woman was crying in a car parked and stranded in hurt. i offered comfort, extended a hand she did not see before she said, 'we're gonna burn them so bad, i swear, so bad.' my hand went to my head and my head went to the numbers within it of the dead iraqi children, the dead in nicaragua. the dead in rwanda who had to vie with fake sport wrestling for america's attention. (3)

Hammad's poem challenges the U.S discourse that aims to radically oppose the Arabs/Muslims with Americanism through reconfiguring the trauma of the event

across multiple spaces bringing together the devastation of New York with the “dead Iraqi children.” This approach does not justify the attacks, instead it creates a form of associative traumatic remembering. That is, writers like Hammad address traumatic experience in order to bridge the gap created by the U.S. media, and arguably some western fiction writers who were quick to dismiss the trauma(s) caused by the war on terror. Hammad works against the imperial American imaginative geographies that allow the trauma of 9/11 to create an ethnic/political division. At the end of her poem, she criticizes the Bush administration divisional rhetoric:

affirm life.

affirm life.

we got to carry each other now.

you are either with life, or against it.

affirm life.

3. Conclusion

I believe that Arab-American writers have provided critical perspectives that attempts to reshape the American traumatic cultural memory of 9/11. They do so by incorporating alternative geographical and historical events that interact with or provide context for the 9/11 attacks. They also criticize the redeployment of orientalist discourses for the purpose of forming a national American unity, which is only made possible through the vilification of Arabs as “Others.” The Arab-American literature, then, articulates the cultural traumas in an attempt to bridge the “unbridgeable gap between before and after [the 9/11 attacks]” (Gray, 2009). Through expressing what Rothenberg terms the “multidirectionality of collective memory,” Arab-American writers reconsider the global circulation of traumatic memory and its tendency to exclude the histories of oppression that both precede and follow the traumatic event (Day, 2022). In whatever way these Arab writers recall their historical trauma(s), it always going to be a difficult task to recall these traumas. Hammad (2003) poetically describes this heavy burden when she admits that “there is no poetry in this. there are causes and effects. / there are symbols and ideologies” (3).

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