INTRODUCTION
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One's language is so much a part of one's identity that to denigrate it is to effectively deny one's human ability to communicate.

(Wolfson and Manes)

This crucial feature of life is its fundamental dialogical character. We become full agents, capable of understanding ourselves, and hence of defining our identity through our acquisition of rich human languages.

(Taylor 79)

Approximately 5 - 6 million Arab-Americans live in the United States today. 1 In spite of their varied national origins ranging from countries in the Middle East to Africa, it is their common language – Arabic – that has characterized them as a community in the United States. Arab immigration to the United States happened in three distinct waves propelled by different circumstances and conditions: 1870s to 1920s, 1920s to pre-1967, and 1967 till the present. Due to this continuous history of immigration, the first and the second generation of early Arab immigrants grew alongside the constant influx of new immigrants. Varied challenges and issues have faced the immigrant Arab-American community in its history, many of them political. In this study, we shall try to understand and locate the interplay of these issues with the literary writings of Arab-Americans. We shall examine some major Arab-American poets in order to understand and delineate the characteristics of their

1 According to various estimates, the population of Arab-Americans varies between 3.5 - 6 million. The Bureau of United States Census (http://www.census.gov/prod/2003pubs/c2kbr-23.pdf) recorded in 2000, 1.2 million Arab-Americans. However, other estimates are much higher. According to Arab-American Institute (http://www.aaiousa.org/arab-americans/22/demographics) and Arab-American Almanac (5th edition) 3.5 million, Allied Media Corp. (http://www.allied-media.com/Arab-American/Arab%20Demographics.htm) 4 million, and Arab Times (http://www.arabtimes.com/english/advertising/FAQ.htm) 6-7 million.
writings. The focus would remain primarily on poetry not only because it comprises an integral part of the ‘essential’ Arab identity, but also because it is a neglected area of scholarship, with only a few studies and anthologies emerging over the past few years.

Arab-American writers arrived on the literary scene of the United States during the early twentieth century. The foundation of the Pen Bond Association in 1920, pioneered among others by Khalil Gibran, was a major watershed. Early writers like Ameen Rihani and Khalil Gibran were embraced not only by the Arab-American community but also by the Arab as well as the entire world. Their writings were remarkable for invoking the rich legacy of Arab literary traditions while simultaneously pioneering modern Arab sensibilities and literary forms. Their early success, however, was not matched by Arab-American writers in the subsequent years. Poetry, particularly, failed to make a major mark until poets like H.S. Hamod, Fawaz Turki, D.H. Melhem and Naomi Shihab Nye started writing. Contemporary Arab-American poets are both first and second generation immigrants with some of the most significant poets being women. The difference in gender does reflect in the way a poet conceives her ethnic identity. Women poets are doubly marginalized, first by race and secondly by gender. Their poetry though recognized recently, rises as a different genre altogether, with an attempt on the part of many practicing poets to make a canon of Arab-American Women Poetry.

Contemporary poets confront an entirely different sense of being Arab-American poets. The formation of their self is highly fluid, and flexible, neither Arab nor American, but something else, something rich coming out of the mixing of the two. For many second generation Arab-American poets, Arab themes are not a necessary component of each and every work. Rather, some of their works are hard to distinguish from the writings of other American writers. While early Arab-American writers wrote both in Arabic and English, by now, many second generation Arab-American writers write primarily or even exclusively in English. So, the significance of Arabic language for Arab-American literature has also undergone a change with time.

Arab-American poetry is a significant reality today. There was a definite story behind its growth. Coming down from a generation that lived on the cross roads of East and West, the heritage of Arab-American poets is international. The poets are conscious that poetry is one of the fewest means to overcome and break through the
barriers of religion, race, nationality, sex and language. Arab poetry is very rich, popular and passionate. If art attains greater intensity on peripheries, Arab-American poetry is a case in point.

These poets are from different nationalities and different religious denominations. There are poets of the earlier generation, who identify themselves as mainly Arabs, and there are poets who think of themselves primarily as Americans. On the other hand, memories of the ‘homeland’ as well as burning political issues continue to occupy a running component of Arab-American poetic themes. By now some Arab-American writers argue that they are part of a larger body of work of immigrant or Diaspora writing. We shall look at some of these debates and discussions. However, due to the constraint of comprehensive theoretical works about Arab-American poetry, we shall try to derive our own conclusions based on a close reading of some major Arab-American poets. The poets we examine in some detail are: Ameen Rihani, Khalil Gibran, H.S. Hamod, Fawaz Turki, D.H. Melhem and Naomi Shihab Nye. We also employ post-colonial theory, especially the theories of Homi Bhabha, Edward Said and others to understand these poets.

In our first chapter, we examine the history of the migration of Arabs to the United States. As we have already stated, Arab migration to the United States happened in three phases. The first phase from 1870s to 1920s was caused by economic distress combined with persecution under the Ottoman Empire. Most of the immigrants to the United States in this early phase were Christians. Early immigrants took peddling as their main means of living. In 1924, the Johnson Reed Immigration Act of the United States restricted the entry of immigrants to the US. This minimized immigration from the Arab world. In this phase, too, however some degree of immigration continued to take place. The socio-economic condition of the Arab-American community improved a bit. They now took to opening department stores, restaurants, movie houses, joining the retail business, becoming workers in factories and living as a community in the suburbs of industrial towns. Some educated professionals also came to the US from the Arab world.

Along with the brain drain, political exiles, Palestinian refugees and Muslims started immigrating to the US in greater numbers. In this phase the Arab-American community got a bit more organized in the US. Immigrants started taking American citizenship and initiated political participation by organizing themselves into Democratic and Republican camps. Sections of the Arab-American community also
joined effort with the French and the British against the Ottoman Empire, especially after the First World War. In 1965, the US immigration laws were relaxed once again. This coincided with the intensification of the Arab-Israel conflict with the beginning of the cataclysmic wars of 1967 (six day war between Egypt, Syria, Jordan and Israel), 1973 and 1982. A wave of doctors, lawyers, engineers, semi-educated businessmen and students now immigrated to the United States. However, these years were also marked by growing disillusionment with the pro-Israel stand of the United States. From the 1970s onwards, legislations against terrorism started getting passed in the US. These were accompanied with the escalation of racial and ethnic discrimination along with the strengthening of stereotypes and prejudices against the Arabs. Post 9/11 this trend only intensified further. It must be noted here that contrary to popular stereotypes, Muslims comprise a minority among the Arab-American community.

As an ethnic group, their community is shaped by a long history that spans over a century. Arab immigrants have come along way from their humble beginnings of pack peddling to become wealthy entrepreneurs, scholars, reaching heights in most professional careers. Early clannishness which fragmented their community gave way to form an “Arab” identity, behind which they united regardless of family faith and geographical boundaries. As a community, they come together in their struggle to confront marginalization, racial discrimination and pro-Zionist attitude of US media and the Government. As a result, lobby groups such as the Arab-American University Graduates (AAUG) were formed to promote Arab interests and defend their causes. Arabic press equally contributes to safeguard their culture. Arabic language newspapers give them a voice to express themselves. Early writers to modern contemporaries have written about their experiences and their new life in the US. Although at the beginning, they rejected Americanization, over the years they have taken conscious efforts to be part of the new culture.

Our second chapter is an overview of Arab-American poetry. In the early twentieth century Arab-American newspapers, magazines and journals started emerging in the United States. Writers started writing both in English and Arabic, and also translated major Arab writings into English. Reminisces of their ancestral home were combined with experiences in America. The duality between homeland/adopted home, outsider/other, belonging/alienation started resonating in literary themes. Khalil Gibran played a pioneering role in popularizing the free verse in Arabic and became a
legendary writer. Ameen Rihani brought about the Arab Renaissance by becoming a strong advocate for reforms. Mikhail Naimy emerged as a major poet-critic in the backdrop of the Great Depression. We also discuss early writers like Nasib Arida, Elia Abu Madi and Amin Musriq. In contemporary times poets like Sam Hamod write about American multiculturalism, novelists such as Mona Simpson and poets such as Samuel Hazo touch only slightly upon Arab themes, others write extensively about refugees and immigration. We will examine contemporary poets like Gregory Orfalea, Samuel Hazo, Sharif Elmusa, Khaled Mattawa, D.H. Melhem, Naomi Shihab Nye, Elmaiz Abrinder and Nathalie Handal. We will also discuss Lisa Suhair Majaj, Ben Bennai, Fawaz Turki, David Williams and Lawrence Joseph. Some of these writers view themselves as primarily Arab and others as primarily American. In this chapter, our main attempt is to try and understand whether some common themes or forms give a unity to Arab-American poetry or whether their only point of demarcation is the Arab descent of the writers.

In our third chapter we shall examine the poems of Ameen Rihani (1876-1940) in detail. He is often called the founding father of 'mahjar' or immigrant literature. He wrote poems, essays, novels, short stories, art critiques and travel chronicles. He introduced the free verse in Arabic poetry. He was the first major Arab-American to write in English as well as to introduce Arab literature to the American public through major translations. He also played a major role in modernizing the Arabic language. Through his poetry he promoted the unity of all religions. He emphasized realism and humanism, and refused to identify with any rigid identity. He used Sufism as a synthesis of Christianity and Islam. As a result he was perceived as a mystic for a long time. An example of his poetry is the following excerpt from A Chant of Mystics:

Nor Crescent Nor Cross we adore:

Nor Buddha nor Christ we implore:

Nor Muslem nor Jew we abhor:

We are free.

We are not of Iran of Ind,

We are not of Arabia or Sind:

We are free.
We are not of the East or the West:
No boundaries exist in our breast:
We are free. (III, 45-54)

Being politically active, he acted as a bridge between the Arab world and America, and was also known for his anti-Ottoman and anti-Zionist views. He was a tireless crusader for Arab unity. He also pioneered the use of Arabic words in English. In this chapter we examine the themes of his poems, particularly his use of nostalgia for his homeland in Lebanon while accepting New York as his second home.

In our fourth chapter, we shall examine the poems of Khalil Gibran (1883-1931) who infused eastern mysticism into western materialism. As far as early Mahjar poetry is concerned, he is the most pioneering figure. Gibran was one of those rare writers who transcend the barrier between East and West, and who could justifiably call himself a citizen of the world. Gibran was prolific in both Arabic and English and earned a reputation as a love poet. He invoked ‘nature’ as ‘home’ in most of his poems. He advocated the unity of all religions, especially in view of sectarian violence in Lebanon. He founded the Pen Bond Association in 1920 and brought Arab American writing to the centre stage of American literature in an organized manner. In To Young Americans of Syrian Origin, Gibran writes,

It is to stand before the towers of New York and Washington,
Chicago and San Francisco saying in your hearts, “I am the
descendant of a people that builded Damascus and Babylon and
Tyre and Sidon and Antioch, and I am here to build with you,
and with a will.”

It is to be proud of being an American, but it is also to be proud
that your fathers and mothers came from a land upon which
God laid His gracious hand and raised His messengers. (21-26)

Gibran wrote in Biblical style and used Sufi teachings as well as the style of the English Romantics. In The Prophet written in 1921, he merged Christ and Prophet Mohammed, peace upon them, into one and was himself believed to be a prophet for a long time. He was a social and religious reformer and attacked the sorry state of his
homeland in Lebanon as well as the institution of the Church. As a result, he was
excommunicated from the Church and exiled from Lebanon under the Ottoman rule. Khalil Gibran’s popularity remains unabated and is reflected in the growing interest in his works and this continuing popularity is a clear enough indication of his standing among the people of the world. In truth, Gibran has become an integral part of the literary legacy of both the West and the East. Gibran never applied for US citizenship and died as a Lebanese. (Zoghaib 3)

In the fifth chapter we examine four contemporary poets in detail, two of them, women, namely, D.H. Melhem and Naomi Shihab Nye. The other two are H.S. Hamod, and Fawaz Turki. They are second generation poets. H.S. Hamod’s poems express grief and tension over living in America. Both his identity and religion are problematized. He uses ‘family’ as a symbol of his identity and heritage. Motifs of Arab food, language and music recur repeatedly in his poetic themes. ‘Memories’ of the Arab world are extremely important for him. He uses both Arabic and English in his poems. His poems do not invoke the Sufi tradition. Rather he writes explicitly about political events like the massacres of Sabra and Shatilla, conflicts of identity, criticism of both George Bush and Islamic fundamentalists in the post-9/11 scenario etc. We examine the content of his poetic themes. Fawaz Turki is a Palestinian activist who grew up in a Palestinian refugee camp and moved to the US in 1973. His poems too are explicitly political and exhibit the dual burden of response and responsibility upon a Palestinian-Arab. He writes,

traditionally in Palestine society, it is the poet, rather than the ideologue or the theoretician, whose work is taken by the people as starting point for their pragmatic and metaphorical conjunctions on meaning. Hence the role of the poet is both response and responsibility. He internalizes his society’s malaise – at this time, its national struggle and projects it outwardly to the people in his work. (Orfalea, Elmusa 196)

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2 The concept of unity of religions or bringing together religions of the East and the West, especially Christianity and Islam, is seen very clearly in Khalil The Heretic, in Spirit Rebellious. This book announced Gibran as a social and religious rebel. It was banned and Gibran was excommunicated from the Church and exiled from the country. At that time, Lebanon was under Ottoman rule, a typical corrupt state where the Prince and the Priest, both exploited the poor and the weak
D.H. Melhem is a pioneering Arab-American woman writer. She writes poetry, essays, novels, critical works and a musical drama. Themes of love, nature, war, travel and death recur in her poems. It is interesting that being a second generation poetess, she invokes the memory of her homeland through the memory of her mother. Her poems are primarily located in the American locale and engage with the gaps between the rich and the poor in American society, parent-child relationship, etc. However, she also writes about the double-marginalization, oppression and degradation of an Arab-American woman and emphasizes the need to eradicate stereotypes and prejudices. Naomi Shihab Nye is a folksinger, poet and novelist whose poetry is an affirmation of her Arab roots. While she writes explicitly about political themes like Palestine and the Middle East, as a result of which many of her works are banned in Israel, she also argues that her bi-cultural identity goes to her advantage. Instead of lamenting a lack or incompleteness in her identity, she professes a wholeness about her Arab as well as American background.

On the whole, in this chapter we examine poets who write from different Arab-American sensibilities, ranging from explicitly political writers to those who lament their condition, to those who address the challenges before Arab-Americans without a running sense of lament. The examination of women poets reveals a different approach to the Arab-American condition through primarily familial and interpersonal ties. However, memories of homeland, nostalgia and the political situation in the Middle East comprise an integral part of the volume of work produced by contemporary Arab-American poets. For some, poetry is more on behalf of the community, for others it is an extremely personal expression.

Edward Said says, “We cannot accomplish our self-determination as a people unless we can write and tell our own history—from ancient times till the present” (Nash, Arab Writer in English 138). While early writers dwelled upon the past and history of the Arab world in their poetic themes, introducing the Arab world and sensibilities to the Americans, contemporary writers deal more with contemporary history and themes. Ambivalence, hybridity and multiculturalism as discussed by Homi Bhabha can be discerned in the poetry of Arab-Americans. While early Arab-American writers too were politically committed, they were mainly concerned about the themes of immigration, uprooting, reform and modernization. Contemporary poets are more concerned about the tensions and ambivalences of their own existence in the
United States arising out of constant stereotyping and anti-Arab policies being pursued by the Americans since the second half of the last century. While poets continue to assert the uniqueness of the Arab-American experience, there is a growing tendency among writers to extend solidarity to other ethnic communities in America in order to avoid isolation. While the broad category of Arab-American identity still holds, there is simultaneous unity as well as fragmentation within the Arab-American community, with contemporary poets being known more as Palestinian-American or Syrian-American etc. Recent anthologies of Arab-American poetry make some initial attempts to give recognition as well as coherence to Arab-American poetry. This thesis is an examination of all these details and developments.

While we engage in a close reading of some major Arab-American poets in our study, we are aware of the fact that this study is conducted in the absence of any comprehensive history of Arab-American poetry. For instance, the time lag between the early greats and contemporary poets merits an explanation. However, these questions require a deeper examination based on more empirical facts, which we still lack. A comparison between Arab poetry and Arab-American poetry, or Arab-American and Afro-American poetry etc. could also have been useful. However, while recognizing some of these unaddressed areas we only hope that our study will contribute to an emerging archeology of scholarship on Arab-American poetry.