CHAPTER II

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The “Arabness” of my poetic self gives me the heritage of a culture in which poetry is the record of the mind, the soul, and the spirit of a people.

Ben Bennani
(Orfalea, Elmusa 218)

Arab-American literature has received mixed responses from students, professors and critics. Some of the responses have been quite odd, to say the least. For instance, questions have been asked about the very existence of Arab-American culture. Is there an Arab-American literature or, for that matter, does Arab-American poetry exist?

If by Arab-American poetry is meant poetry written by Americans of Arab descent, then Arab-American poetry has now been composed for a century at least. It’s true that Arab-Americans have not produced as much poetry as other ethnic groups have, but poetry by Arab-Americans has been extremely significant. However, the fact remains that the Arab-American poetry has been a much-neglected genre. It’s a great irony that for the Arabs, who are people for whom the love for poetry is native and deep, that very few have noticed the Arab-American poets. All ethnic groups in the US: Black, Hispanic, Jewish, Indian, Chinese, Armenian have had their anthologies of poetry for quite some time, and until recently there was none if one wanted to find who these Arab-American poets were, and what kind of poetry they were writing.

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

*Adab al-Mahjar* (emigrant literature) achieved great distinction between the two world wars, and although it found distinction in all genres, its most significant flowering was evident in poetry. The growth of Arab-American poetry is related, in diverse ways, to the growth of the Arab-American people. Arabs as a race have always attached great importance to songs and poetry, as means to explore and experience their age-old culture and customs. The similar proximity between culture and poetry is visible, in the context of the Arab-American poetry.

The Arab-American community has been shaped by a century old history of migration, with diverse attitudes to home and America. This diversity is very much reflected in the great body of Arab-American poetry. The poets include 3rd and 4th generation Americans as well as recent immigrants. These poets are from different nationalities and different religious denominations. There are those who write both in Arabic and English and also those who write only in English. There are poets of the earlier generation, who identify themselves as mainly Arabs, and there are poets who consider themselves primarily as Americans. This diversity complicates an easy assessment of what constitutes “Arab-American Poetry”, and there are serious challenges in the way of giving an overview of Arab-American poetry.

Forgetting all complications arising out of such diversity, we can listen to what the famous editors of *Grape Leaves: A Century of Arab-American Poetry* have to say. “When a people leaves the dry, hot lands of civilization’s oldest cities (Damascus, Byblos, Jericho) and finds itself in one of the youngest countries on earth—what happens? For one thing, poetry. Like mint in a wall-crack, poetry sprouts from such ruptures of sensibility” (Orfalea, Elmsa xiii). Indeed it is the immigrant experience, which unites the Arab-American poets across nations and generations.

While Arab-Americans come from a broad range of nations, background and experiences, their lyrical voices is generally “other” oriented. Their poetry is a natural response to their homelands, and their confrontation of newer realities in America. Hence, what is crucial to the genesis of Arab-American poetry is the conscious formation of being an Arab-American poet, which is different from being an Arab or
an American or an Arab-American. We may have to begin with the beginning of the community of poets called the Arab-American poets, to be able to put later the genre of Arab-American poetry in proper perspective.

When we speak of Arab-American Poetry along with the mainstream American literature, we have a feeling that the former is a newcomer. However, the truth cannot be denied that there have been poets like Ameen Rihani and Khalil Gibran, who have penned poetic words for the past century.

The year 1920 was crucial to the history of Arab-American poetry in English. The first generation Arab-American poets achieved the most marked development in the history of Arab-American poetry. This year, in New York, was founded the Pen Association or the Arab Writer's Union (al Rabitah al Qalamiya). The pioneering figures were Khalil Gibran (1883-1931), Mikhail Naimy (b.1889), Abdul Masih Haddad (1890-1963) and Nasib Arida (1887-1964). Khalil Gibran went on to play a vital role in the growth and the esteem of Arab-American poetry in English. However, there were poets who were not the part of the Pen Association, and yet their names are taken with great respect in the world of Arab-American poetry, and Arab poetry in general. Ameen Rihani is one such poets who has done as much as anybody to achieve prestige for Arab-American poetry.

Gibran, apart from being a great poet himself was greatly concerned about the future of Arab-American poetry in general. In the formation of the Pen Bond Association, Gibran had a decisive hand. It was he, who gathered ten émigré Syrian writers in the New York City (among them Naimy and Elia Abu Madi) to form the "Pen League". The objective was to lift and liberate Arab literature from the mud of stagnation and imitation, and to, as Naimy put it, "infuse a new life into its veins so as to make of it an active force in the building up of the Arab nations" (Orfalea, Elmusa 19). Linguistic inventiveness was required to make Arab - American poetry a potent genre. Gibran closely studied Walt Whitman, and adopted free verse and prose poem, both of which were the choice of the modernist poets in the United States, like Ezra Pound. This went against the convention of the classical Arabic qasida and the monorhythm (each line ending with the same sound). The Pen League brought so many radical changes into Arabic literature, which motivated distinguished scholar and anthologizer, Selma Jayyusi to call Gibran, "the greatest literary figure in Arab letters during the first three decades of this century" (Orfalea, Elmusa 20).
The founding of the Pen Association was conceived way back in 1916, with the objective of strengthening and enhancing the community of Arab-American poets. It was a kind of literary/cultural association, which was serious about the future of Arab language and literature in America. The initial inspiration came from Nasib Aridah and Abdul Masih Haddad. Both writers were keen about the goals, which became the mainstay of the Pen Association in 1920. One of the most avowed goals was to encourage a new generation of Arab-American writers, who wanted to experiment with language. This was about writers writing in the Arabic language.

The writers writing in America were faced with an immediately new challenge than their counterparts back home. When newer realities, in form of cultural dislocation, came their way, their different experiences made them inventive with the language, in ways different from the poets living in the Arab lands. However, it doesn’t mean that the Pen Bond Association catered only to those poets who were writing in Arabic. One of the chief members of the association was Kahlil Gibran who also wrote in English. The pen Association provided the platform to the Arab poets of all backgrounds, through mutual discussions and encouragement, to take the onus of being Arab-American poets. Al-Rabitah-al-Qalamiah was formed into a literary society, and its members signed their names to their works with the tag: “A member of al-Rabitah al-Qalamiah”.

The society published a statement of purpose one month after its formation. The statement appeared in al-Saith, and its author was Amin Musriq. This statement acted as the society’s manifesto. One of the primary goals was to promote a sense of identity between al-Rabitah al Qalamiah’s intended readers-the Arab-American community living in the United States of America.

The 1916 formation of the Association differed from the later formation in 1920, in some of the modifications and additions to the manifesto. The writer’s interest was safeguarded to a greater extent in the latter formation. It endorsed the fact that the Arab-American community needed a writer’s union, which would ensure the members’ rights to publish what each wished, and that each member received just compensation. These ideas were present in the 1920 formation. However, they were less overt as the members of the al-Rabitah al-Qalamiah were well known and didn’t need a favour by the individual publishers.
American poet, who will have the power to decide the criteria of passing a poet as Arab-American?

Therefore, the contention that validity of the Arab-American poet lies in his/her ability to write on distinctive “Arab” themes stands weak. A poet may not ostensibly reflect the Arab or ethnic culture but on closer reading of his/her poems, one may find something Arabic in his attitude to poetry. In other words, other non-Arabic subjects may be intrinsically Arabic. Italian critic Fred Gardaphe says that “the challenge to contemporary American writers of Italian descent will be deciding not so much where their loyalties as intellectuals lie (in speaking of their Italian heritage or seeking a place in American culture as artists) but how to fashion an identity as artists out of influences provided by both Italian and American cultures” (Majaj, Hyphenated Author 2). The same applies to Arab-American writers and poets. They develop their identities as poets out of both Arab and American influences.

The Arab-American poetry is a nascent genre, though its history is one century long. Like Arab-Americans themselves, Arab-American poetry is a part of the Arab culture, of the American culture and also part of something still in the process of being created. An Arab-American poet writes out of her/his identity as an Arab, the identity of an American and out of the identity that is formed when these two cultures come together. The poetry that comes out is Arab-American because it shoots out of the experiences of the Arab-Americans.

The Arab-American poets, influenced by the Pen Association had a challenge to seek integrity between their Arab and American identity, and this strain has continued till modern times. All Arab-American poets express their feelings about their actual or ancestral homeland, by blending them with their experiences in America. There are foreign-born poets who have Arabic as their first language (Rihani, Madi, Gibran) or American born who learnt English as their first language (Hamod, Orfalea, Marshall, Abinader). On several occasions poets like Hamod, Marshall and later Nye and Elmusa mixed English with Arabic. The tension and the balance between the culture of the homeland and the culture of the adopted land figure most prominently in the poetry across times.

Like other ethnic writers in America (Lawson Inada, Japanese American; David Kherdian, Armenian American; Simon Ortiz Acoma, Native American, etc.),
Arab-American poets attempt to fuse the two cultures, of course with variations in term of the attitudes to their homelands in poets separated by generation. There is a sense of belonging ness and a sense of being alien, the ‘other’, the ‘outsider’, who will never fully fit into Anglo Western European world. However, this was not the ambition of the poets, to fit into the Western framework at the cost of denunciation of their ethnic heritage. This is not to say that the poets bring an opposition to the culture in the adopted land but instead an addition to the general American culture. The objective has been to contribute to the expansion of the culture.

The poets of the first generation were mostly from the Syrian region. These poets, first as they were to negotiate an alien land and its culture, were tough and passionate about life. It’s mentioned in the Twentieth Century Annual Report of the Associated Charities of Boston (1899), that the Syrians, whom these poets represented, were thought, “next to the Chinese . . .the most foreign of all foreigners”; some of the national newspapers called them “the last ethnic group in America safe to hate” (Orfalea, Elmusa xiv). However, the early Arab-American poets believed that poetry ran in their blood. The practice of song and poetry could be traced back to the lips of the pre Islamic tribes, to the poets of Phoenicia, for example Meleager of Tyre, and as ancient as the Canaanite singers. The Arab people have always demonstrated a great love for poetry and poets. Although now the spread of modernization and its various manifestations have wedged a divide between people and poetry, a single visit to the Middle East would reveal the close bond between poetry and people and the influence poetry has on the daily life.

Unlike United States, poetry for Arabs is not an isolated activity, limited to the academy. On the other hand, it is enmeshed in the very breath of the Arab people. It is an integral part of the social and cultural mores and practices. It is a connector of the people. In the Introduction of Grape Leaves: Twentieth century Arab-American Poetry, the editors tell an anecdote:

a funeral at a farming village of Arbeen village, Syria, where a poet-grandchild of the deceased read a poem as the wood coffin was lowered into the freshly dug grave. The poet -- and not the priest or Imam—said the last words of farewell, and tears seemed to flow to the inflections of the poet’s rhythm. Earlier at a haflah, or evening party, cousins jumped up chanting unplanned poems as salutes to the
American travellers and praises to the hoop of the night. There is the Arab tradition of zajal, where poets try to outdo each other in extravagant imagery, a kind of poetic duel that serves as popular entertainment. (Orfalea, Elmusa 14)

The American poet Robert Frost reading at a Presidential inauguration may be a rarity in America, but for the Arabs, such affinity between poetry and public occasions is a great requirement. To make similar distinctions, a politician poet in the United States (for instance, Eugene McCarthy) is considered an oddity, whereas in the Arab world, poets actively engage in politics like Nizar Qabbani of Syria, Ghazi Algosaibi of Saudi Arabia, and Mahmoud Darweesh of Palestine. Ibn Rashiq, the eleventh-century scholar and critic rightly said that the Arabs wish each other for three things, the birth of a boy, the coming to light of a poet, and the foaling of a noble mare.

As far as the early Mahjar poetry is concerned, Khalil Gibran is the most pioneering figure. He is an essayist, novelist, and mystic poets, whose writings in Arabic as well as English have been loved by readers for a long time. The poet from Mount Lebanon has, on so many occasions celebrated the sights and sounds of his homeland, which he had to leave, after a threatening famine hit his country during the First World War. Gibran later proved to be the messiah of Eastern spiritualism. He often looked to the fascinating landscape of his native place, Bsharri, Lebanon for the inspiration of his poetry. His was a truly diasporic sensibility, where memory became important to him. The memory of his homeland brought back the sacred aesthetics of its nature in his poetry. The objects awakened by memory became the emotional as well as the cerebral apparatus of poetry. Mostly his shorter lyrics like *Song of Man* are reminiscences, in which he contemplates the past glory in contrast with present misery.

The legendary author of *The Prophet* was born in 1883 in Bsharri, a mountain village in Lebanon, cut off from the rest of the world by snow for six months of the year. He was a Maronite Christian, though his family held that the poet’s mother descended from Muslim converts. He had his primary schooling in Beirut. Gibran’s father was a rough man with violent temper, who alienated his wife and children. Subsequently, he was investigated and jailed for graft charges. While his father still remained in jail, young Gibran, at the age of twelve, denouncing a good-for-nothing
father, left his homeland for Boston, accompanied by his mother, half brother and two sisters in 1895. He returned to Lebanon in 1898 to complete his education. Back to Boston in 1903, he wrote his first essay The Emigrant in an Arab-American newspaper. Indeed, the fascinating surroundings of his homeland, the beautiful sites of Ihdan and Bsharri were in great contrast with the turmoil of his early life. This tension inherent in him made him sensitive, and toned his psyche to make him a writer. The young Gibran in the pinewoods, enjoying the beauty of nature was the same who had to confront the harshness of real life.

This contrast produced in him a duality, which characterized his philosophy and poetry at later stage of his life.

Nature, as first experienced by the young Khalil Gibran is “the voice of eternity” and “the idea of life and its conceptualization... Indeed, Nature is himself at that stage of his development, for, if I did not exist”, he says, “you (Nature) would not have existed”. No doubt, Nature was his abode, his hiding place from the conflicts surrounding him. It was the refuge for young Gibran. He was the part of the Nature and Nature was the part of him, Nature in Lebanon, Bsharri and its mountains, its sky and its trees. (El-Saad 1)

Like any other writer abroad, Gibran was nostalgic about the place of his childhood life. He constantly yearned for his roots. Once he had said to his friend Naimy while painting him, “I wish Mikhail, I can visit the cedar valley before I die” (Zoghaib 2). Later when he returned to the cedar valley, he was ironically without the light of his eyes.

It was in Boston that he was to launch a career as an author and poet, which would be a landmark in the history of Arab-American poetry. Gibran had his fortune favouring him in his pursuit to become a writer. Though the Arab-Americans were generally looked down upon, Gibran was picked up from the slums by the top Bostonian literary publisher of the period, Fred Holland Day (Copeland and Day). Day had published the early poems of Stephen Crane, which Gibran liked to read and admired very much. Further, it was Day who had introduced Yeats to the American readership. He was a great influence on young Gibran, and the publisher took Gibran as his protégé. Gibran also did illustrations for Copeland and Daybooks.
Gibran’s initial writings were in Arabic for small Arabic journals published in the New York City. The first pamphlet that he wrote was again in Arabic, Music (1905). It was inspired by his trips to Boston Symphony. Very soon his love and lifelong benefactress Mary Haskell motivated Gibran’s first attempts to write verse in English that eventually made a publishing history. The Prophet is the all time bestseller published in 1923 by Knopf and its parent organization, Random House. A staggering number of eight million copies were printed. All of his eight books in English are famous till date, and still remain in print after many editions. In 1912, Gibran settled in the New York City, where he committed himself to writing essays and short stories in Arabic and English. His writings are highly romantic with a strong strain of longingness for his homeland. They are all suggestive of his deeply mystical and religious outlook and attitude. His books in English include The Madman (1918), The Forerunner (1920), Sand and Foam (1926), and Jesus, the Son of Man (1928).

Gibran as an artist was gifted with enormous aesthetic sensibility. Not only was he a great poet and storyteller but also an impressive painter. Quite early in his life, he showed great promise in drawing and painting. Fortunately, in 1896, he discovered the Denison House: an establishment that favoured and encouraged artistic creativity among slum children and immigrants. Later in the same year he was introduced to the esoteric Bostonian artist - photographer Fred Holland, who was then experimenting with philosophy in art. Gibran was photographed in his studies, in various postures, including some in nude. The avant garde photographer had a significant artistic and intellectual impact on Gibran.

Eventually, Gibran became the best selling author of the 20th century with a volume of prose poems on religion, love, death, work and other themes bound up with human existence. This volume was entitled The Prophet, published in 1923 that earned him lasting fame.

It was the immigrant experience of sailing to the new world, which was most instrumental in the metamorphosis of Gibran into the writer of The Prophet. The excessive sensibility and the excessive sentimentality of the early years in Lebanon grew into a more refined sensibility. The comparatively simple life in Lebanon had to meet the harsher experiences in the United States of America. However, the early years in Lebanon were equally important. The immigrant experience, no doubt
inspired this growth, but the wings of imagination were raised and lifted by the philosophical, religious and intellectual anxieties of the early years.

The imagination and sensibility of Gibran, Blakean in various ways, which went into the making of The Prophet was also reflected in the creation of Jesus, the Son of Man: His Words and Deeds as Told and Recorded by Those Who Knew Him. These two are his masterpieces, the first one evoking Mustafa and the other supposedly inspired by the idea of Al-Hadith Al-Sharif. In The Prophet, Gibran, in a way, fulfilled a promise made to himself, that of visiting his homeland and experiencing the beauty of childhood world again. Al-Mustafa realizes his dreams, when, after twelve years away from his homeland, he decides to return to Orphalese.

It is very clear that Lebanon was on his mind very much, when he wrote The Prophet. As a writer, Gibran starts from the deeply felt native inspiration and cultural heritage, linguistic wealth and Arab sensibility to a universal understanding of humanity. Ultimately, he surpasses national, geographic borders to the world of humanity at large. He shows great faith in crossing boundaries of the soul to the unity of human beings, not separated by borders but united by the intercommunication of the souls, human beings who are not separated by religion or sects. Gibran was popularly viewed as an international citizen, who believed in the brotherhood of men, striving for the harmony among human beings.

If we formulate a tradition of Arab-American poetry, the next poet in importance is Ameen Rihani, whose contribution is immense in the development and growth of the Arab-American poetry. A fellow Lebanese of Khalil Gibran, Ameen Rihani, also carried the mantle of a pioneer. Like Gibran’s The Prophet, Rihani too has a seminal book in his name, The Book of Khalid, as his most remembered voice as an Arab-American apostle of the Arab culture and literature in America. “Our country is just beginning to speak, and I am her chosen voice. I feel that if I do not respond, if I do not come to her, she will be dumb for ever” (75). Like Gibran he was a philosopher poet who had come to America during the first wave of migration that took place before the First World War. However, Rihani was much more vehement in his proclamation of his Arab identity, and he took the cudgel for the Middle East political interests.
Like Gibran, he was born a Maronite Christian, on 24 November 1876 in Freike, Lebanon, some miles to the north east of the capital city, Beirut. He died there, itself on September 13, 1940. For most of his life, Rihani kept moving between the West and the East, in particular between Lebanon and his second home, New York. He travelled extensively in the Arab world once he migrated to the United States. He was an essayist, novelist, philosopher, poet and political activist. As a writer, Rihani pioneered the Arab Renaissance, and the themes that he wrote extended from modern American painting to Russian ballet. He demonstrated a great foresight, moreover, in the selection of social and political subjects that were the most burning questions in both the Arab and American world, like the pan Arab question or the question of Zionism. He championed the Arab interests in both political and economic realms, writing down experiences, which have been retained and read till date as the most precious account of the time.

Rihani was the first modern traveller, as also a writer of great brilliance. With him was reborn, the tradition of travel writing, earlier established by Ibn Jubayr, Ibn Battuta and others. In English, he could be placed within the tradition of T.E. Lawrence, Burton, Doughty and Thesiger. When Rihani was in his mid- twenties, he realized for the first time then that the decay of the Arab culture was on, due to the ignorance and sectarian fanaticism. He saw the solution in radical intellectual, spiritual and material reforms, and devoted himself to achieving that. His articulation of those radical views in speeches and writings won him many adversaries, but more crucially it brought forth many Arabs who shared his beliefs. Writing in English, Rihani was able to reach to a wider and vaster readership. In his writings, he, more often than not, defended the Arab views, and the rights of the Arabs to live with dignity, freedom and independence. He never failed to explain to the western people the contributions made by the Arab people, and their desire to unite with the Western democratic world in order to construct a global society and better future.

Not only was Rihani the first Arab to write a novel in English, he was also the first to write English verse. The most central of his writings are the novel, The Book of Khalid, which influenced many Arab writers like Gibran and Naimy; his brilliant translation of the verse Abu'l-Ala'al-Ma'arri; his own Sufi poetry included in A Chant of Mystics and other poems; his social and political essays in The Path of
Vision; and his brilliant travel trilogy, Ibn Saoud of Arabia: His people and His Land, Around the Coasts of Arabia, and Arabian Peak and Desert: Travels in al-Yemen.

Rihani’s novel The Book of Khalid was illustrated by none other than Khalil Gibran, who took it as inspiration for his most famous book The Prophet. The Book of Khalid is largely philosophical and autobiographical. The writer indulges in a passionate plea for the reconciliation of the dualities: the material and the spiritual, the East and the West, of Christianity and Islam. As is the case with many off-the-trend works, it more or less failed, with many virtues in it. The book, however, remained as the most comprehensive and authentic account of the liberated Arab world written in the English idiom. Rihani’s protagonist Khalid is an irreverent and blasphemous young Arab from Ba’albek. He pursues circular paths, which take him from Lebanon to America and eventually back to the Middle East. His voyage in the direction of the West, which he undertakes with a companion named Shakib is compared to the way of the cross: “The Voyage to America is the Via Dolorosa of the emigrant; and the Port of Beirut, the verminous hostelries of Marseilles, the island of Ellis in New York, are the three stations there of” (Bushrui, Arab-American 9).

Ibn Saoud of Arabia: His People and His Land, the first book in the trilogy is an impressionistic biography of a great Arab leader, Sultan, King and Imam of Najd, in the first few decades of the 20th Century. It was published in 1928 and details the journey made by the author through Najd, now Saudi Arabia. The first part of book three describes his experiences in the companionship of the Ibn Saud. Rihani had gone there to act as a mediator between Ibn Saud and the British in the boundary dispute and agreements in the oil concession. As the second part of the title suggests, the book was not entirely biographical, though it contains fair amount of biography, illuminating the larger-than-life of the famous king. It is more remarkably known as the book depicting the Arab world and life, an account of the sights and sounds and the people encountered throughout the journey. The book is full of many profound statements about the Arab people adjusting to the 20th century ways of living.

The most celebrated work, however, which made Rihani a perennial Arab-American poet is his book of verse The Chant of Mystics and Other Poems. This collection of verse is essentially spiritual. There is the Sufi message of yearning for mystical union, which pervades the atmosphere of the poems. The following lines
from the title poem advocate adequately the Sufi philosophy, and reinforce the central theme of *The Path of Vision* and many of Rihani’s other writings.

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 the East or the West;
No boundaries exist in our breast:
We are free. (III 45-54)

Rihani’s finest poetic venture, however, is his translations of the 11th century *Milton of Arabia*, Abu’l Ala al-Ma’arri. Rihani chose to translate this work rather than any other work in Arabic, because Abu’l Ala, apart from being a great poet and scholar, was also a thinker of repute. Rihani admits:

Very little is said of his teachings, his characteristics, his many-sided intellect, in the biographies I have read. The fact that he was a liberal thinker, a trenchant writer - free, candid, downright, sceptical withal—answers for the neglect on the part of the Mohammdan doctors who, when they do discuss him, try to conceal from the world what his poems unquestionably reveal. (Bushrui, *Arab-American* 10)

Gibran and Rihani, together, can be considered the stalwarts of Arab-American poetry. They laid a solid foundation of this genre by preparing a niche for it in the American culture. This was possible, because both of them were great thinkers and visionaries. Though, they were greatly affected by their homeland, they were not parochial in their views. They rather strove for the integration of the two cultures, the culture of the motherland and that of their adopted land. They were never captive to their nationality, but extended to a universal citizenship that united and included all cultures and nationalities. In their writings, both the worlds meet and assimilate in the poetic consciousness that destroys the barriers wedged between the East and West. They were able to integrate the spirituality of the East and the materialism of the West. They also stressed the equality between men and women, which made them favourites in both cultures. The ideals of justice, freedom, world peace, environment,
unity of religions, internationalism and the like received immense support in their writings.

Even a casual discussion of Arab-American poetry of the formative years, of the time of Ameen Rihani and Khalil Gibran would be undone if one fails to take into account Mikhail Naimy. He was the latest to die, of all the poets of Gibran’s circle, and the only writer from the Arab world to be considered for the Noble prize in literature. He lived in the United States for twenty years of his life, and wrote all his poetry here. In his young days, Naimy travelled through the great powers. In Poltava, Russia, he studied for orthodox priesthood, which he abandoned after having an agonizing love affair. He, then came to the United States in 1911 and received a law degree from the University of Washington, Seattle. There he penned down an intelligent and profound criticism of Gibran’s The Broken Wings. It resulted in an invitation from Gibran to come to the New York City.

Naimy was one of the most important members of the Pen League. He announced an “all-out war on hypocrisy in literature” in his famous critical work The Sieve (al-Ghirbal). However, Gibran died in 1931, and Naimy left the United States in order to work and finish his biography of his beloved friend, Gibran Khalil Gibran. Naimy’s poetry, most of them written during his stay in New York is collected in Eyelid Whisperings (Hams aljufun, 1943). Like Gibran and Rihani, Naimy began experimenting to write poetry in English. Three of the poems were published in The New York Times.

It should not be forgotten that Naimy was writing in the backdrop of the Great Depression while making an assessment of his poetry. Most of his poetry has a bizarre and surrealistic flavour. Death is an overwhelming theme with him. He is almost obsessed with death. As he had studied in Russia, the influence of the great Russian novelists and poets is clearly seen in his poetry. Especially, the madness of the pre-Bolshevik revolution has clearly left an impression upon how Naimy projects any kind of obsession in his poetry. Several of his poems, however, like Autumn Leaves, mix death with creation and hope.

Spread over the earth!
O joy of the eye
ballroom of sun, O
swing of the moon
O organ of the night and O
guitar of the dawn!
Sign of the restless,
art of the wayward,
memory's total glory-
the trees have cast you off. (1-10)

As can be seen in this poem, Naimy is capable of a curious blend of imagery and rhythm. There is intelligent inflection of the familiar objects like the sun and the moon, and he twists them to carry over the meanings he intends.

Arab-American poetry has an equally interesting history after the three great pioneers of the genre departed. Seeing them off, we suddenly come face to face with the contemporary Arab-American poetry. And this places us on a slightly different terrain, because we confront now poets, who are not *mahjars* but those who were either born in the United States or moved in when the initial peculiarities of the crossing over of boundaries was over. There is also a subgroup of poets, who we have to deal differently: the contemporary women Arab-American poets. The difference in gender does reflect in the way a poet conceives of her self-formation and how she links it with the consciousness of her ethnic identity. But first to discuss the contemporary male poets, we have many famous names like Sam Hamod, Lawrence Joseph, Fawaz Turki, Ben Bennani, Gregory Orfalea and others.

The contemporary poets, as they belong to the second generation of the immigrants, 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. One of the major concerns of the poets is to trace the development and growth of the Arab-American community in the United States. They examine the realities of an eroding Arab ethos and the formation of an engrafted subjectivity, more leaning towards the American culture. They are the true poets of multiculturalism. These contemporary poets differed greatly form their predecessors, Gibran, Rihani, Naimy and others, in their conception of their ethnic identity.
imaginative, needing an acculturation into the Arab heritage, unlike the previous generation that needed an acculturation into the American culture.

In his poem, *After the Funeral of Assam Hamady*, Sam Hamod reflects on the contrariness of an Arab-American identity, as far as the contemporary situation in the United States is concerned. The following lines adequately reflect the complexities involved, of a 20th century diasporic identity.

Hajj Abbas Habhab: my grandfather
Sine Hussain: an old friend of my father
Hussein Hamod Subh: my father
me
6 p.m
middle of the South Dakota
after a funeral in Sioux Falls
my father and grandfather
ministered the Muslim burial
of their old friend, Assam Hamady

me — driving the 1950 Lincoln
ninety miles an hour

“STOP! STOP!
Stop this car!”

Why?
“STOP THIS CAR RIGHT NOW!” -Hajj Abbas
grabbing my arm from the back seat

“Hysh Iyat? (What’re you yelling about?)” – my father
“Shu bikkee?” (What’s happening?) – Sine Hussin...

I stop

“Its time to pray, sullee

the sun sets

time for sullee...

I’m embarrassed to be with them (1-73)

The poet is highly embarrassed and perturbed about his father’s orders that the car should be stopped for a prayer in the middle of South Dakota. They have to bow towards the direction of Mecca. Clearly a difference between generations is reflected in the poem. For the poet of the previous generation, there would be nothing odd in the father’s order to stop the car and pray. But the poet, brought up with strong modern American influence, finds it really hard to understand the rituals of his religion and culture, which is of no significance to him. The poet is also frank about the possible wedge between the older people and the young ones reflected in their attitude to the religious custom. The sterner tone of “STOP THIS CAR RIGHT NOW!” suggests this.

Sam Hamod has written, in all, ten books of poems, all exploring the contemporary realities in the American multiculturalism from the perspective of young modern Arab-Americans. His recent works include Dying with the Wrong Name: Selected Poems (Anthe/Symrana) and The Arab Poems, The Muslim Poems (Cedar Creek Press). Dying with the Wrong Name was nominated for Pulitzer Prize.

Samuel Hazo has written beautiful poetry on the generational differences in the understanding of the Arab-American identity. The very fact that the poets of this generation saw their future in siding with the American side of their identity is clear from what Hazo has to say, as quoted by the editors of Grape Leaves, “I began writing poetry in college for reasons that remain mysterious to me, and I continue to write it because it is the only way I know to try to say what can’t be said, which is for me the only thing worth saying. Being an American of Arab origin has nothing to do with it and shouldn’t and can’t have” (Orfalea, Elmusa 118).
Hazo is one of the most prominent poets, in the contemporary poetic arena in America. He is the founder of the International Poetry Forum in Pittsburgh. Born to the immigrant parents of Assyrian and Lebanese origin, he was nominated for the National Book Award. His twelve books of poetry include Blood Rights (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1968), Once for the Last Bandit (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1972), and To Paris (New Directions, 1981). His attitude to the immigrant experience, and his construction of an Arab-American "self" can be best seen in the following lines from his poem, For Fawzi in Jerusalem.

Leaving a world too old to name
And too undying to forsake,
I flew the cold, expensive sea
Toward Columbus' mistake
Where life could never be the same (1-5)

The stress on Americanisation by the new poets shows an intense ambivalence about Arab ethnicity. Sharif S. Elmusa is yet another contemporary poet treating new problems of identity through his verse. His addition to the group of Arab-American poets is unique because he is from Palestine. In his poetry one might discover a strain of Arab consciousness more deep than others because of the political conflict in terms of Zionism, which his history is related to.

At present an associate professor of political science at the American University in Cairo, he was born to a farmer in the village of Abbasiyah outside Jaffa, where his father grew figs, grapes and the popular Jaffa orange. The family moved to Jordan, and kept moving as refugees. He attended schools in Jericho and Jerusalem and university at the Cairo University, Egypt. He immigrated to Boston and completed his Masters in Civil Engineering from the Northeastern University. He worked as a civil engineer till 1977. His distinction as a poet lies also in his various academic writings like his books, A Harvest of Technology: The Super-Green Revolution in the Jordan Valley (1994) and Water Conflict: Economics, Politics, Law, and the Palestinian-Israeli Water Resources (1997).

His poetry was published in Poetry East, Greenfield Review and Christian Science Monitor. He was nominated for the Pushcart Prize in 1984. His translation of
Arabic poetry was published in Modern Arabic Poetry (Columbia University Press, 1987).

Writing poetry, for Elmusa, also involved a personal struggle of a different kind as he says in Poetry as Cocoon, included in Grape Leaves: A Century of Arab-American poetry:

In school I loved both poetry and math. (Later I read that someone had defined the poetic image as a theorem without a proof). The result was a restless detour through science and engineering, then a more reconciled coexistence with political economy of development. But Poetry chooses us, as Yevtushenko said. And when it welled again, I felt as if a missing leg had been restored. Yet in today's single-specialty world, one sometimes feels, or is made to feel, a trespasser.

(Orfalea, Elmusa 226)

He answered the call of poetry with some magnificent pieces both personal and political. We may quote a short personal poem, The Two Angels.

Among the things that mother told me

as a child:

Every person has two angels
standing on his shoulders:
they weigh every deed.
On the right Nakir,
for the good deeds;
for the bad, Nakeer, on the left.

That is why my gait is tilted now
and as the years pass
my back will grow hunched.
Such nakedness! (1-12)

There is nothing political about this poem and there are many others of this type, where a personal emotion originates from a familiar domestic experience. In this case, the advice from a mother about good and bad deeds—a universal advice—captivates the imagination of the poet. But again the gait of the poet tilted on two sides does suggest a division in his consciousness about his self-image.

In poems, like *In the Refugee Camp* and *Expatriates*, the immigrant sensibility comes out more clearly. The former is a small poem on the experiences of the refugees, and the poet is quite descriptive about their habitat:

The huts were of mud and hay,
their thin roofs feared the rain,
and walls slouched like humbled men.
The streets were laid out in a grid,
as in New York,
but without the dignity of names (1-6)

Unlike Elmusa, Gregory Orfalea was born in the United States, in Los Angeles. He had an association with Elmusa in the sense that both edited the anthology, *Grape Leaves: A Century of Arab-American Poetry*. His family had a women’s garment making occupation. His grandparents were Syro-Lebanese immigrants. Orfalea wrote fiction and essays apart from poetry, and his works appeared in *Los Angeles Times Magazine, Washington Post, Triquarterly* and *Antioch Review*.

*The Rose of Brooklyn* is a remarkable poem by the poet in which he expresses the typicality of being an Arab-American of the contemporary generation.

Your scream was neither

English nor Arabic, but life

out of a funeral home, tears

more abundant than chandeliers, skin

pure as snows of Lebanon… (23-27)
The poem talks about the difficult dilemma faced by the contemporary poets of a search of identity, which is available only in a mixed form. Khaled Mattawa is a fascinating young poet, and in an essay, Freeways and Rest Houses: Towards an Arab Location on the American Cultural Map, he expresses this dilemma:

...the urge to flee the city, and the United States altogether, to a more humane architecture, to a belonging wider than the property I rented. I have never quite fulfilled those urges...Because home, the country of my birth and upbringing, is no longer home, because by many accounts the United States remains a lucrative and attractive option, because there is no where else to go. (Mattawa, Akash 49)

Apart from writing some wonderful poetic pieces like Ode To Mejnoon, Mattawa is known as an able translator, and some of translations have earned him a great place among the new Arab-American poets. Like this small poem called Freedom that he translated from Arabic written by an Iraqi poet Saadi Youssef, is beautiful:

Alone now, you are free.
You pick a sky and name it
   a sky to live in
   a sky to refuse.
But to know that you are free
to remain free
you must steady yourself on a foothold of earth
so that the earth may rise
so that you may give wings to all
the children of the earth. (1-10)

The contemporary Arab-American women poets offer an important diversity and distinctiveness to the genre of Arab-American poetry. The question of ethnic identity and the Arab world and its cultural heritage that these poets deal with has a rich dimension. It is unfortunate that only lately these women poets have been recognized, that too as a necessary filler for theoretical discussions. The most
interesting fact about the Arab-American poets, which must be considered while discussing them, is their double marginalization. They are doubly marginalized by gender as well as race. Apart form the racial exclusion, the oppression by the social and familial power structures, their confinements by tradition, defines the identity of Arab-American women poets. By the dint of a richness of their voice and imagination, these poets, limited to their homes, cite food and family as primary sources of identity.

D.H. Melhem gives a thoughtful voice of the female within home in Rest in Love.

long through your hand
broom handle moves
upon sand trails
of summer feet
sunlit shoulders
bent over dustpan
straighten at me
you smile
sufficient, here
to be (1-10)

Apart from the collection Rest in Love, her other important works include Notes on 94th Street (1972, 1979) and Children of the House Afire (1976). Her self-perception of being an Arab-American poet comes out of the mingling of languages and cultures, and such mingling, however, gets a new colour for her writing as a women poet. “My father recited incantatory Arabic poetry and sang hymns in Arabic and English. My mother read aloud from Whittier and from Longfellow's Hiawatha. I remember my parents cranking an august Victrola out of which Caruso and John McCormack would magically issue” (Orfalea, Elmusa 103). Though this statement
ostensibly makes the Arab-American women poet's experience look no different form the male experience, the racial reality was also mixed with factors of class and gender.

Arab-American women poetry has, in recent times, risen as a different genre altogether, with an attempt on the part of many practicing poets to make a canon of Arab-American Women Poetry in English. The anthology entitled The Poetry of Arab-American Women was one such effort taken up by Nathalie Handal, who is the editor of the book. It is an extremely comprehensive collection, covering a wide range of Arab-American Women poets, and also some Arab Women poets. The editor writes, “The first concern of Arab women poets were, unsurprisingly, their unjust degradation, marginalization, and oppression by the social system, and their boundedness by tradition” (12).

However, the Arab-American poets are as vociferous to voice the reality of diasporic rupture of selves. In other, words, they do not simply confine themselves to question of gender, but move beyond in the domain of thinking about cultural and ethnic identity. Naomi Shihab Nye, the renowned Palestinian- American poet says, “Sometimes travelling in Mexico or India or anywhere else, I feel that luminous sense of being invisible as a traveller, having no long historical ties, simply being drifting eye... but after a while I grow tired of that feeling and want to be somewhere where the trees are my personal friends again” (Barenblat, Interview with Naomi Shihab Nye 2). And yet, the fact remains that any talk on Arab-American women poetry must examine the relationship between gender, class, ethnicity, socio-political context and the Arab immigrant experience.

Naomi Shihab Nye was born of a Palestinian father and American mother in St. Louis Missouri, in 1952. She grew up in Texas with real experience of Arab literature form her father, who was working as an editor of a major daily newspaper. Apart from being a poet, Nye grew up to become a famous folksinger. She was selected for the National Poetry Series by Josephine Miles for her book Hugging the Jukebox (Dutton; republished by Breitenbush). Along with this one, her first book, Different Ways to Pray (Breitenbush, 1980) won the Voertman Poetry Prize from the Texas Institute of letters. The American Library Association also forwarded Hugging the Jukebox for the Notable Books List in 1982.
Though Nye writes about themes, which are humanistic in a general sense, diasporic in a way that partake both male and female experience, her sense of being a women poet is clearly discernible in her feminine voice. We can take, for example, the following verse from *Making a Fist*:

For the first time, on the road north of Tampico,
I felt the life sliding out of me,
a drum in the desert, harder and harder to hear.
I was seven, I lay in the car
watching palm trees swirl a sickening pattern past the glass.
My stomach was a melon split wide inside my skin.

"How do you know if you are going to die?"
I begged my mother.
We had been travelling for days.
With strange confidence she answered,
"When you can no longer make a fist." (1-11)

Elmaz Abinader has the distinction as a student of the famous African American novelist Toni Morrison. Born in Carmichaels, Pennsylvania, in 1954, she is a poet of Lebanese immigrant parents. She is one of the most academically accomplished poets among the Arab-Americans; she wrote her doctoral thesis for the University of Nebraska. Apart from being a wonderful poet, she is also respected for her fictional works. One of her novels was *Stories of Fathers and Sons, Voices of Mothers and Daughters*, which she based on the experiences of her ancestors.

As a poet, however, Abinader has won many; she won the First Prize form the Academy of American Poets for her poem *Women of Power Who Write Poetry*. Her poems appeared in *Nimrod, Alaska Quarterly Review* and *Willow Springs Magazine*. *All My Grandmothers Could Sing*, an anthology of poems by women poets of Nebraska has poems by Elmaz Abinader. Like many other Arab-American poets, she
is a teacher, and has taught at various colleges including Marymount College and St. Peters.

Abinader’s attitude to writing can be summarized by a reading of her autobiographical statements in *A Way of Thanking*, included in *Grape Leaves*.

The need to express what I see in writing is part of an Abinader tradition. For centuries diaries, poems, plays and stories dramatized the history of the people: public history and private property. Poetry is my way of seeing and measuring myself and my cultures. I am the poet of identity, of a concern, of a culture, of a history, and these influence the vision of my poetry. (Orfalea, Elmusa 282)

She is very sure in acknowledging the debt she owes to her culture and identity for making her a poet. What she says later is more relevant to understand:

More generally, being an Arab-American poet is a political statement that suggests we are, none of us, only writers, but writers whose lives have been fashioned by histories and philosophies and who choose to bring the personal experience of this culture into universal terms in the images we write. Being an Arab-American poet is also a gift to my heritage, my only way of thanking my ancestors for my voice, my color, my hair, my parents and siblings, and of the mountains and waters of Lebanon which stay in my memory. (Orfalea, Elmusa 282)

This is the most powerful statement by any Arab-American poet in chaste prose on the dignity about his/her ethnicity. Her poems are more vigorous than her contemporaries in seeking a union with the ancestral voices; and this strain in her poetry takes her closer to Rihani and Gibran. There is an expressible meaning of union with Lebanon in her poem *Pigeon Rock: Lebanon*:

If I put my hand into water,

my body would float out and land with the fish

on the coast of Greece, slung against the shore.

In the boat my cousin sings American songs

to please me. He wears high shoes everywhere he goes. (1-5)
Abinader voices in her poems one of the most acute challenges faced by the new generation of the Arab-Americans: the difficulty of understanding one’s ancestors’ language and culture, because the opportunity to live in that culture and language is divested to them. In her poems, this problem takes a much more personal touch, as for instance in *Letters from Home*:

> Every time you weep, I feel the surface
> of a river somewhere on the earth is breaking.
> You wipe your eyes as you read aloud
> a letter from the old country. From the floor
> I watch curls of words through the sheer
> pages. Your brothers and sisters have gathered
> around you. I do not understand the language
> but feel a single breath of grief holding this room. (1-8)

The indefinable ruptures of selves that characterize Arab-American poetry find another contemporary voice in Nathalie Handal. Her letter to Lisa Suhair Majaj contains some brilliant aphorisms on the reality of an immigrant poet of the present generation:

> Perhaps we are fragments of wood that cannot be used to finish any single window? Perhaps we are masked birds in search of a face we think we are looking for?
> You have often told me, dear Lisa, that you don’t know who you are. But is it really you who doesn’t know or others who make you think that you do not know who you are- Arab or American or Palestinian, both or neither? (Mattawa, Akash 139)

Handal is conspicuous among the group because of her Palestinian origin. And she gives a more intense grip to an identity held by an experience of in-between ness. Two of her beautiful poetic pieces are *A Butterfly’s Gaze* and *Escape*, and they suggest a remarkable force in imagery, which searches for a meaning to the identity of being an Arab-American. *Escape*, included in the *Post Gibran Anthology of New*
Arab-American Writing, is a short poem, and stands out for its rhetoric compressed in clear images:

\[\text{Time escapes us and gives no time to escape}\]
\[\text{Voices caught in the narrow distance between two raindrops.}\]

\[\text{Time escapes us and gives us no escape}\]
\[\text{Voyage, that instant when you realize you've landed.}\]

\[\text{Time escapes us and gives us no escape}\]
\[\text{and we continue listening to the rumbling of passing travellers,}\]
\[\text{the slope of our tragedy ending with nothing but bare hands,}\]
\[\text{memorizing the journey... (1-8)}\]

The recipient of the letter of Nathalie Handal, Lisa Suhair Majaj, is herself a poet of great promise. Her verse form is even more modernist, and she explores the issue of identity by the mode of imagery and symbolism. Her poem Poppies stands out for its suggestiveness:

what longing
thrust me into the wind.

searching for poppies
as if they could save me?

they wouldn't last: a week,

maybe two, and exuberant

earth would be silenced...

I'd need
to depend on memory (1-10)
These contemporary poets like Suhair and Handal are more complex and difficult to read for they play with language and are quite experimental, but in the process they give a modern touch to their realities. The last line in the poem quoted above is emphatic in a different way than the lines of earlier poets because of a ring of imagery that precedes it.

There is a great deal of colloquial force in her poems, especially Departure, which reads,

Leaving is always
like this. Years
of hours and days
ticked off like
a body count:
what’s left but
shards of memory
smoothed and hoarded,
shrapnel griefs,
a few regrets? (1-10)

It is perfectly fine that Arab-American poetry should move with time, and these new poets have been impressive in welding their past with the contemporary styles of poetry prevalent in the West.

As one can see there are obvious problems in giving an overview of Arab-American poetry. The problems arise because of various reasons, chief among which is the different nationality that these poets possess. One important thing to remember is that Arab-American is not a homogenous category; there are wide differences among Arabs in terms of their history and culture. Secondly the experiences of migration have been peculiar to each person, and hence we cannot expect that each poet would feel and write in the same way about the conditions of being an Arab-American. And again the history of migration is a century old, which gives yet another challenge to include all poets of different ages in one parameter.
However, one good thing about the contemporary Arab-American poets is that though poetry in their hands take new contours, they never lose track of the ways shown by the pioneers Gibran and Rihani. As says Lisa Suhair Majaj:

Arab-American literature has gone through many shifts since the early decades of the twentieth century, when Khalil Gibran and other *Mahjar*, or émigré, writers in New York formed Ar-Rabitah, the Writer’s Guild, and began to publish poetry and prose that changed the face of Arab-American literature...but in many ways the problems that confronted the *Mahjar* writers continue to confront us as Arab-American writers today. (Mattawa, Akash 67)

In the coming chapters an attempt is made to discuss these poets in terms of specific realities of time, generation, gender and nationality.