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A. Contemporary American Literature: How it begins

Contemporary American Literature or the modern American literature starts generally after World War II. As one of the most diverse nations in the world, the United States has different events in regards of the time and place of the Contemporary Period of American Literature. This literary period has a wide range of issues and styles so that there are no sufficient perspectives to make lasting conclusions. That is why it is not easy to categorize American literature since the end of World War II. However, it is said that contemporary American literature has characteristics that clearly identify or reflect the multiculturalism of contemporary American society. Then, it is very important to not let aside the several events in order to have a general background of this period.

To begin with, the Civil Rights Movement was a political movement against racial segregation and discrimination in the Southern of United States (1955-1965). There were many efforts to fight against racial oppression and abolish the institution of slavery. Secondly, the Vietnam War occurred during the Cold War and lasted from 1959 to 1975. The purpose was to impose communist system over the entire nation. It took place in Vietnam, Southeast Asia and it has been said it is the longest military battle in the history of the United States. Thirdly, all over these years, United States has been the attraction of many immigrants who want to succeed in that land, and to achieve their “American dream”. According to BBC NEWS, immigration has been always present in US history; and the immigration flow to this country has first accelerated after the French Revolution and during the 19th century. Hence, American ports are full with German, Chinese, Irish, Italian, and Polish immigrants.

For a half century, immigrants from diverse cultures have sought freedom and opportunity in what is now the United States of America. Challenges are inevitable as immigrants adjust to life in a new country, with a new language, and as their new neighbors become acquainted with them. The writers among them recorded their experiences in letters, journals, poems, and books, from early colonial days to the present. Marie Arana stated in her essay ‘Today, one in four among us has a strong tie to a foreign past. More than one in five was born elsewhere or has an immigrant parent. We are a nation of many voices, myriad histories — a hotbed of artistic possibility. It is little wonder that from this vibrant and variegated culture, a new American literature has sprung’ (eJournalUSA,4). Among those immigrants some of them came from Middle East countries which called Arabs.

more than half a century. For many years, it was the best-selling book in the United States after the Bible, with some eight million copies in print (Abinader 2000, 2; Orfalea and Elmusa 1988, xvi). The U.S. Congress recognized Gibran's contribution to American arts and letters in 1990 by authorizing creation of the Kahlil Gibran Memorial Poetry Garden in Washington, D.C., which was dedicated by then President George H.W. Bush in 1990. It remains the only park dedicated to a writer in the nation's capital.

Despite Gibran's immense popularity, the first serious anthology of American poetry to include his work was *Grape Leaves: A Century of Arab-American Poetry*, published in 1988. He remains revered by ordinary people and literary critics in the Arab world, but Gibran has been scorned and dismissed by the literary establishment in the United States. This may change after the release of a feature film about Gibran's life being made by Arab American writer Rana Kazkaz, whose screenplay has already won a national prize.

From the late 1940s through the early 1980s, there was little self-identification by writers as Arab American, although strong independent poets and writers such as Samuel Hazo, D.H. Melhem, and Etel Adnan established their reputations in this time period. Elmaz Abinader, an award-winning writer herself, says these writers "distinguished themselves initially as writers independent of ethnic categorization (and) later donned the cloak of the Arab American identity" (Abinader 2000, 3).

She describes them as a bridge between the two generations, as well as between Arab American writing and the American literary canon. For instance, Melhem, the author of the first comprehensive study of African American poet Gwendolyn Brooks, helped mainstream Arab American literature by organizing the first Arab American poetry reading at the annual meeting of the Modern Language Association in 1984 (Abinader 2000, 3). Adnan created her own publishing company, The Post-Apollo Press, which has helped ensure publication and distribution of many works by Arab American writers (Abinader 2000, 3). She also served for years as president of the Radius of Arab American Writers, Inc., a writers' group founded in the early 1990s.

Several important anthologies and periodicals have helped generate interest in Arab American literature over the past decade, including *Grape Leaves: A Century of Arab-American Poetry*, published in 1988 by Gregory Orfalea and Sharif Elmusa, and *Food for Our Grandmothers: Writings By Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists*, an anthology of unusually frank essays and often jarring poetry published by Joanna Kadi in 1994. Kadi's anthology gave voice to a community she dubbed "the most invisible of the invisibles" and paved the way for candid discussions by and about Arab American women. *Post Gibran: Anthology of New Arab American Writing* (1999) showcased poetry and prose by recognized writers and introduced a host of newer writers, including Hayan Charara, Mohja Kahf, and Suheir Hammad. The editors encouraged cross genre experiments, asking poets to send in fiction, and essayists their

languages, places, and even ways of thinking. Said embarked on the writing of the memoir after being diagnosed with cancer, and his writings represented a deliberate attempt to reclaim and record his brilliant memories of the lost landscapes and communities of his childhood, many of which literally no longer exist. The book gives the reader an intimate look at the forces that shaped one of the most important intellectuals in recent memory, narrating his often painful experiences as an immigrant, an exile, and ultimately, an outsider.

Naomi Shihab Nye's book, *Never in a Hurry: Essays on People and Places* (1996), Suheir Hammad's *Drops of This Story* (1996), and Diana Abu-Jaber's foodmemoir, *The Language of Baklava* (2005), further illuminate the rich diversity of Arab American lives.

Aside from selected individual reviews, it was only in the 1990s that one could identify any serious tradition of Arab American literary criticism, aided largely by the work of a few "pioneers," including Lisa Suhair Majaj, Therese Saliba, Nathalie Handal, Evelyn Shakir, Mohja Kahf, and Elmaz Abinader. One excellent example of the serious scholarship emerging is *Etel Adnan: Critical Essays on the Arab-American Writer and Artist* (2002), which provides a comprehensive look at Adnan's literary and artistic accomplishments through analysis and close readings. Its authors, Lisa Suhair Majaj and Amal Amireh, have elevated the genre of Arab American writing to a secure place within U.S. academic circles and helped situate it for English-speaking readers. In addition, their work to gather and disseminate secondary sources has helped spawn public appetite for more Arab American writing. Another notable book is *Ameen Rihani: Bridging East and West: A Pioneering*

Call for Arab-American Understanding (2004), a book of scholarly essays compiled by editors Nathan Funk and Betty Sitka to explore the work of this prolific early Arab American writer.

The U.S.-based journal, *Al Jadid: A Review & Record of Arab Culture and Arts*, launched in 1993 by Elie Chalala, has also been an important force facilitating the study of Arab and Arab American texts. *Al Jadid* includes timely book reviews, translations, and a host of original articles on topics ranging from music to theatre, books to journals, fiction to fine art, poetry to performing arts. It provides a forum for continuing scholarship and acts as an important bridge connecting Arab American artists to the Arab world.

II. Naomi Shihab Nye

Naomi Shihab Nye, born in St. Louis to a Palestinian father and an American mother, is an accomplished poet and essayist who has also published several children's books and two novels for young adults, *Habibi* (1997) and *Going, Going* (2005). Nye has also played an important role in showcasing the work of Arab writers and artists in

