

REVIEW

Poetics of Visibility in the Contemporary Arab American Novel. By Mazen Naous. Ohio University Press, 2020. Pp. 240. ISBN 978-0-8142-1429-9.

Review by Ishak Berrebbah (Coventry University, United Kingdom)

In *Poetics of Visibility in Contemporary Arab American Novel* Mazen Naous¹ discusses the politics of visibility that surrounds the identity of Arab Americans in a post-9/11 period through five contemporary novels: Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent* and *Arabian Jazz*, Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land*, Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, and Rabih Alameddine's *Koolhaas: The Art of War*. This book can be regarded as a scholarly endeavor to further secure the position of Arab-American literature and broaden its horizons in academia. It also aims to both enable Arab-American citizens to emerge as visible citizens in the wider American society and foreground under-recognized subjects connected with the Arab culture.

Mazen Naous suggests that Arab-Americans, rather than being invisible, “were perceived as a visible threat to the nation-state and so-called the American way of life” (3). Such visibility is reinforced by a crisis of representation, namely the thought that terrorism is associated with Arabs and Muslims. The troubled situation of Arab Americans in the USA, following the events of 9/11, ascribes to them a precarious position that Mazen Naous calls “hyper-in-visibility”. This term means “simultaneous visibility and invisibility that occasion the Arab-American struggle for self-representation and visibility on Arab-American terms” (3–4). Naous's central argument is that Arab-American fiction constitutes elements that project themselves simultaneously and in a symbiotic way, whether they are formal, cultural, political, or aesthetic. The visibility of Arab Americans and its poetics in the US context, as Naous asserts in his analysis of the novels, intersect with the themes of diversity, transculturality, and heterogeneity, which

¹ Mazen Naous received his PhD from University of Massachusetts, Amherst, USA. He teaches postcolonial literature and theory, Arab American literature, music, and literature, classical and modernist Arabic literature, and translation theory. He is currently writing a book provisionally titled *The Musiqqa of Arab American Literature*.

set out to unfix, complicate, and expand dominant notions of ‘Arabs’ in the USA. His analysis includes a variety of Arab American communities, including Muslims, LGBTQ, Druze Arabs, Christian Arabs, and also secular Arabs. Poetics, for Naous, includes everything which contributes to transiting Arab Americans’ status from invisibility to visibility.

Naous devotes a chapter to each novel to analyze and critique them separately. The first chapter, titled “The Disease as Queer Cure: Rabih Alameddine’s *Koolaid’s: The Art of War*”, shines a light on the experiences of Lebanese characters as they travel between the US and war-torn Lebanon as well as on the “poetics of AIDS dementia and poetics of repetition both to undercut facile and stereotypical religious and multimedia representations of gay men, the AIDS epidemic, Arabs, Muslims, and the Lebanese Civil War” (13). He argues that this particular novel – which has homosexuality as its major theme – is remarkably constructed by an unstable collage of illogical vignettes from various genres and sources. The vignettes contribute to the novel’s complex content and allow “mutually constitutive forms of visibility and representation to emerge” (14). This concerns sexuality, religion, language, and music.

The second chapter, “Blue Notes and Accented Rhythms: Diana Abu-Jaber’s *Arabian Jazz*”, investigates the role of music and its deployment by Abu-Jaber to scrutinize and understand the construction of Arab-American identity. This chapter reflects on the role of musical practice in “complementing the inter(play) of identities and in advancing an improvised (dynamic) and intersectional (dialogic) Arab American identity in *Arabian Jazz*” (55). Naous, in this regard, argues that “Arabian Jazz’s employment of African American Jazz idioms – improvisation and the blue note – adds a formal and poetic dimension that is crucial to the novel’s expansive approach to Arab American identity and visibility” (55). Naous further explains how linguistic variations and transliterations in the novel denote the Arab-American identity negotiation in a diasporic context. In other words, he draws attention to the thought that Arabic linguistic importations that adopt English letters, as projected in narratives, reflect certain shifts in identity formation. For example, Sally, a female character in the novel, changes her American name to Salandria to emphasize her Middle Eastern identity, generating more visibility and improvisation to her belonging.

The next chapter, titled “Sign after Sign: Mohja Kahf’s *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*”, analyzes Kahf’s novel on the basis of its religio-political message that dictates the complex image of Islam and Muslims in the US. This chapter reveals the extent to which epigraphs and signs such as a veil or a beard, or even billboards define the process of signification for Khadra, the protagonist in the novel, and other Arab-American characters. According to Naous, these signs play out in several realities to shape ethnic and religious identities for Muslim Arabs and Muslim Americans. In other words, they can be regarded as

key factors by which to determine and configure Arab-American visibility. The veil, for instance, can be regarded as a sign of women's oppression and the backwardness of Islam, generating Orientalist discourse (97).

Poetics of Visibility then moves to the fourth chapter, which primarily engages the Shahrazadian mode of storytelling in Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* (2007). This chapter, titled "Anagrams of Identity: Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land*", scrutinizes the image and racial profiling of Arabs and Muslims in post-9/11. Halaby posits her novel as a realistic narrative which portrays Arab-Americans' conditions as lived in reality. *Once in a Promised Land* tells the story of Jassim and Salwa, the two protagonists, who migrate from Jordan to the USA in search of a better life. Their expectations, however, clash with the unwelcoming atmosphere in the country, experiencing repressing surveillance because they are Arabs and undergoing the effects of racism and Orientalist stereotypes. Like Diana Abu-Jaber in her *Arabian Jazz*, Halaby, as Naous suggests, manipulates and inserts Arabic language and its transliterations in narratives to affirm the Arab American existence within the fabric of the US – a projection of identity visibility through the linguistic form. This chapter makes it clear that the images of Arabs in the US and identity markers, such as language, are anagrams and poetics by which Arab-American characters, namely Salwa and Jassim, negotiate their experiences. It concludes that Laila Halaby organizes her entire novel around an anagrammatic poetics.

The last chapter, titled "Reframing Infidelity: Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent*", suggests that Abu-Jaber's novel theorizes and poeticizes its intervention across time and space, "both reimagining and reimagining Arab Americans as complex, trans-cultural, and transmodal citizens" (149). Naous argues in this fifth chapter that *Crescent*, based on Arab Americans' experiences and events in narratives, projects an intersection of notable classic works in literary history, such as *Othello*, *One Thousand and One Nights*, and *The Odyssey*. These works, as they appear in the novel, establish cross-cultural and cross-gender Arab-American dialogue, questioning issues of fidelity and infidelity and also countering essentialist notions of Arab-American authenticity. The connection between *Crescent* and these old literary works appears through the main protagonists in the novel – Hanif and Sirine – who personify some fictional figures in the aforementioned classics. By this, as Mazen Naous asserts, Abu-Jaber creates characters who "defy simplistic conceptions of Arabs and Arab Americans" (150).

The poetics of visibility in these Arab-American novels creates a space for the reimagining and reimagining of Arab-Americans along trans-cultural and trans-poetic lines. They demonstrate the heterogeneity of Arab American experiences. Each novel, writes Naous, "offers its unique intervention and formal and aesthetic combinations; together they create a polyphonic multiplex of Arab American

self-expression and art” (191). The central importance of the book, I believe, is that it gives further elaboration on what constitutes Arab-American identity and experiences in fiction produced in the contemporary era, examining several poetics and politics of visibility concerning other minorities and the American mainstream. These poetics enable the readers to see the nuance and richness of Arab-American experience as lived out in reality. It further shines a light on the argument that fiction is one of the ways in which Arab-Americans can correct the dominating narratives of themselves with a representation of their lived realities.

Despite the book’s contribution, Naous does not make it clear what theoretical framework the arguments are based on; the line of arguments in the five chapters, on the one hand, depends on a critical analysis of what characterizes the Arab-American experience and also of what constitutes Arab-American citizens’ visibility in the US: this includes music, gender, art, language, signs, Middle Eastern outfits, etc. These poetics, nonetheless, remain vague and enigmatic and require further interpretations, given that Naous himself refers to ‘poetics’ as a term which represents a kind of an enigma in the literary discourse and can be understood differently by each critic. On the other hand, it relies on several approaches: cultural, religious, historical, sociological, and political. This, perhaps, causes absence of cohesiveness between the five chapters. The conclusion, moreover, does not incorporate all five novels discussed in the book, but merely a superficial opinion on how the poetics of visibility demonstrate the heterogeneity of Arab-American identity. In fact, such heterogeneity is called into question by other literary critics – such as Carol Fadda-Conrey (2014) – who assert that this ethnic identity does involve homogeneous components and can be regarded as monolithic. In addition, Mazen Naous refers to several connotations of characters’ names on many occasions in the analysis of the novels. This, to some extent, could be well illustrated if his analysis incorporates a theoretical perspective related to ‘literary onomastics’. Iraidia Gerus-Tarnawecky, for instance, explains that “[n]ames used in literature form an individual, yet, to a certain degree, parallel group to general onomastic material. They are called literary proper names or literary names, and their theoretical study is literary onomastics” (2013: 312).

I should note that *Poetics of Visibility*, however, contributes to other literary productions that broaden the horizons of Arab-American literature and diaspora. This concerns, notably, Amal Talaat Abdelrazek’s *Contemporary Arab American Women Writers: Hyphenated Identities and Border Crossings* (2007), Carol Fadda-Conrey’s *Contemporary Arab-American Literature: Transnational Reconfigurations of Citizenship and Belonging* (2014), and Steven Salaita’s *Modern Arab American Fiction: A Reader’s Guide* (2011). This book leads the way to future research and represents one of the most transparent attempts to explain complex concepts to new researchers on the ground, which makes this

book a must-read for any professor, scholar, translation professional, and student who engross themselves in the study of Arab-American diaspora, literature, and identity. It can also be recommended to those interested in ethnic literature, ethnic studies, cultural studies, diaspora studies, post-9/11 fiction, Arabic literature, and Middle Eastern studies.

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