

## **Migration, Literature and Cultural Identity: The Case of Arab Emigrants to the United States in the Late Ninetenth and Early Twentieth Centuries**

Badmus Murtada Adegboyega  
Department of Religious Studies, University of Ado-Ekiti, Ado-Ekiti, Nigeria

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**Abstract:** This study focuses on the way in which a group of Arab emigrants of Lebanese stock who were forced out of their homeland due to socio-political reasons, projected their Arab cultural identity in the foreign land. The Arabic literary culture was displayed in an excellent manner which resulted into the formation of Ar-Rabitah, in the United States. On the other hand, their counterparts in the North America also formed Al-Usbah. The influence of their literary endeavours touched the nooks and crannies of the Arab world the result of which gave birth to a modern literary school named al-Mahjar which is a product of cross-fertilization of American/European and Arab cultures and literatures.

**Key words:** Migration, literature, cultural identity, Arab emigrants, cultural interference, Nigeria

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Migration means movement of people or a group of people from a place to another due to reasons ranging from social, political and economic reasons to others such as tourism and relaxation. However, when it is carried out in large number it is then tagged exodus. Also, migration is determined or restricted by nature and wealth of a people. No people on earth could be independent of herself without the need to interact with others or benefit from them.

This therefore shows that migration could be from and to rich or poor, powerful and less powerful nations etc. Another point relating to migration which is of relevant to this topic is the aspect of cross-cultural interactions.

A migration may likely be influenced by the host environment while the host could equally be influenced by her guest therefore, leading to cultural interference this, despite the rigidity or conservative nature of any of the cultures involved.

Having said this, let us briefly examine the reasons behind Lebanese Arab migration to the U.S. and North America in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Historically, migration had long been part of life of the Arabs especially Lebanese.

The pre-Islam Arabs are known to be moving from one place to another in search of green grasses to graze their flocks. In the case of the Lebanese, they are only part of the larger Shamites or Syrians who were famous for adventurous life. They reported to have sailed the high

seas, established themselves and colonized North Africa centuries B.C. (Gibran and Gibran, 1974).

**Massive exodus of Lebanese Arabs in the late 19th and early 20th centuries:** It would be recalled in history that syria in the past was home to a large Christian followership till shortly before the emergence of Muhammad as a Prophet and Messenger of Allah. It became Islamized after the conquests that swept from Arabia soon after the demise of Prophet Muhammad. (Gibran and Gibran, 1974). The Syria of the focus here included what we have today as Syria, Lebanon and parts of Palestine. In essence the emigrants of the focus here were mostly Christians from Lebanese extraction.

During the period under review, Lebanon had fallen under the Islamic empire and under the rulership of the Ottomanic Caliph, Sultan Abdul-Hamid who ruled with high-handedness which exposed the citizens to untold hardship and serious sufferings. (Badawi, 1975). Due to this, one of the available options for these helpless people was to humbly leave their country, seeking asylum in foreign lands. To be able to appreciate their suffering and hardship, various factors leading to their emigration could be summarized under the following headings:

**Political factor:** As mentioned, earlier Lebanon fell under the tyrannical rulership of Ottoman Sultan Abdul Hamid during the late 19th and early 20th centuries and the style of leadership of the Ottomanic leaders during this period was generally characterized with lack of freedom, maltreatment of the citizens of countries that fell under it and lack of respect for human dignity and freedom.

(Badmus, 1997). Under this harsh condition, people were frequently detained, occasionally defamed, often imprisoned and sometimes hung to death for offenses that could attract lesser punishment. Because of this unhealthy situations, Lebanese Arabs being largely affected began at first to move in large number out of their country to Egypt and other North African countries but later changed their direction towards the United State of America due to the domineering influence of Ottoman rulers on some African and Arab countries. And more so, the ongoing colonial activities in Africa around this time was not also a favourable factor for emigrants (Badmus, 1997).

On the other way, the period coincided with a time when Europe and America were undergoing a serious industrial revolution which was attractive to people outside. Additionally, the peaceful and unequalled freedom prevalent in America during this period could have also made it more attractive to emigrants.

The political factor stated above could be summed up in the words of the celebrated Arabic writer Anis al-Muqdisi thus:

The greatest factor that led to the emigration (of the Syrians) is the devastating economic situation of the Ottomanic rule characterized by corrupt and autocratic styles to the extent that security arraignment became weak, chaos triumphed, educational pursuance obliterated and life became unbearable

Also Nasīb Aridah, the famous émigré poet in his *Hikayatu Mahjar Sūriyy* (The narration of the experiences of Syrian emigration) also says in verses, trying to explain the political factor.

I have come a strange man from the Middle East. Far away from the passion of my beloved ones where I lived. I have chosen America as my beloved country. And it has proven to be good for me as. I have taken her. Many people before me have come to her for wealth acquisition. And that is why I have also come like others (my predecessors). But unlike others, in addition I have come to request for a comfortable life. Full of unequalled freedom and this I have achieved

**Economic factor:** Going by the words of al-Muqdisi, the economic factor being one of the factors leading to massive exodus of the Syrians to foreign lands emanated from the political factor. Citizens under the Ottoman rule generally abandoned farming and engagement in

productive activities because heavy taxations were levied on such activities. This is better described in the words of Abdo El-Kholy when he says:

Our Detroit fellow came to America in 1902. His reason for leaving his country Lebanon or Syria as it was then called among many eastern countries, a part of Ottoman Empire whose satellites suffered and bore heavy burden of political submission, social inferiority to the Turkish ruling class and economic obligations. Everything was heavily taxed, even one's own garment, no more than one member at a time of the large family could go outside or walk in the street for garment had to be sealed to indicate tax payment (El-Kholy, 1960). Additionally, El-Kholy quoting Warner and Scole added a point to the economic reason which he called forces of attraction exerted by the expanding American economy (El-Kholy, 1960)

As a result of this, Syrians in their tens and thousands migrated to Africa, Europe and the United State of America in search of greener pastures. On settling down in their various places of asylum, many of them engaged in various gainful ventures through which they later assisted their families, friends and relations at home and abroad. An Émigré Arab Poet, Mas'ūd Samāha summed up the economic reason why the Syrians migrated to foreign land as. We have come to the foreign lands purposely for business transactions that would earn us independent living. Apart from the above mentioned political and economic factors, other related factors include unhindered freedom of migration which availed the Syrians unimpeded freedom of traveling to the United States.

Residential and employment opportunities which were benevolently opened by the U.S. authority to the emigrants especially Arabs without much sentiment of race and religions constituted another important factor that aided easier exodus of the Syrians to foreign lands (U.S. and North America). To sum it up, all the above-mentioned factors eventually led to a situation in which change of environment became imminent for the Syrians who could afford the cost and withstand the stress of traveling. They set out en mass to all parts of the world; Africa, Asia, Europe, U.S. and North America.

The actual history of Syrian migration started around 1854. Around 1870 and 1900, it is reported that around one third of the Lebanese populations have migrated to foreign lands due to the Ottoman's tyrannical leadership styles. As at 1960, the Lebanese government official record put the total number of emigrants to foreign lands at one million, seventy one thousand and thirty seven.

The largest percentage of this number were reported to have traveled to U.S. and North America (selected scholars of history, *Ibid.*) with only few to African countries because this was a time when colonial activities were steadily progressing in Africa which oppositional movements here and there which could not be conducive for emigrants seeking peaceful places of asylum.

**Mahjar, the birth of a modern Arabic literary school:** Mahjar which is a derivative of the Arabic verb Hajara connotes a literary school which evolved among the Syrian Arab emigrants to the United States and Latin America in the late nineteenth and early 20th centuries. They were predominantly Maronite Christians from Lebanese extraction who due to socio-political and economic problems had to migrate to the U.S. and North America. Poetry which is a branch of literature it is said is the Register of the Arabs. The Lebanese emigrants, on getting to their various destinations rekindled the literacy gifts in them and engaged in various literary activities, especially founding of two giant literacy circles, Ar-Rabitatul-Qalamiyyah (The Pen League) in the United States as well as Usbatul Andalusiyah in North America (Badmus, 1997). These groups, apart from carrying out their literary activities served as pressure groups which turned into freedom fighting movements against the Ottomanic dictatorship in their homeland.

Additionally and more importantly, the literary activities of their new environment greatly influenced these groups of literary men. The literary works in English and French especially that of Long Fellow, Walt Whitman and Edgar Alan were top on the list of western poets and writers who greatly influenced the thinking patterns of the Mahjar literary figures (Badmus, 1997). At the end of the day, birth was given to a literary school, an hybrid of Arabic and English literatures, expressed in Arabic which is named and called Mahjar or émigré in English.

Ar-Rabitah which is the major focus in this study was established on the evening of 20th April, 1920 at the house of two brothers, Abdul Masih the publisher of *As-Sayeh* and Nudrah Haddad who trilled the members on attendance to a befitting entertained (Nuaymah, 1965).

Before its establishment, various periodicals have been founded by people who later came to be members of Ar-Rabitah. These include *al-Funun*, *as-Sa'ih*, *The Golden Link* and *Fatat Boston* among others (Gibran and Gibran, 1974). Each and even all of these contributed in no small measure to ensure a unified group of Arab emigrants to the United State but which failed. However, they all served at a point in time to serve as the mouthpiece of the emigrants poets.

From their mission statement, at the point of establishment of Ar-Rabitah, it could be deduced that a

serious task was ahead of the members. The statement goes that the discussion at the gathering was to what the Syrian writers in New York could do to lift Arabic literature from the quagmire of stagnation and imitation and to infuse a new life into its rein so as to make of it an active force in the building of the Arab nations (Nuaymah, 1965). The pioneer members in attendance at the meeting were Gibran Khalil Gibran, Naseeb Aridah, Willian Catzeflis, Rasheed Ayoub, Abdul Maseh Haddad, Nudrah Haddad and Mikhail Nu'aymah (Nuaymah, 1965). A week later, on 28th April, 1920 at Gibran's studio 51, West 10th Street, New York, the final drafts and other relevant documents necessary for the establishment of Ar-Rabitah was concluded. To quote from the source, parts of the concluded clauses are that:

- The organisation to be called in Arabic AR-RABITATHL-QALAMIYYAH (meaning the Pen Bond) and in English AR-RABITAH
- It is to have these officers: A President who shall be called chieftain, a secretary who shall be called Counselor and a Treasurer (Nuaymah, 1965)

Before this section is concluded, it would be necessary to state that despite the large influence of the western literary figures on the Mahjar school, it was equally and even greatly influenced by the works of the earlier modern Arabic literary schools like the Neo-Classical School pioneered by Al-Barudi but nurtured and developed upon by Shawqi and Hafiz Ibrahim, the Diwan School of Shukri and al-Mazini and the Apollo School of Abu Shadi (Granebaum, 1971).

**Modernity in the works of Mahjar poets:** From the previous submission, it has been undoubtedly established that the members of the Mahjar School were largely influenced by their contact with the western world and western literary works which greatly shaped their approaches to modern Arabic literature. However, the members of Ar-Rabitah or the Émigré School placed high premium on Western ideas than the traditional values in Arabic literature. This is reflective in the words of Gibran Khalil Gibran when he says:

If the meaning of beauty of thought requires the breaking of rulers, break it. If there is no known word to express your idea, borrow or invent one if syntax stands in the way of needed or useful express, away with the syntax (Gibran and Gibran, 1974)

In addition, the influence of western literature led to their invention and adoption of versified free poetry

writing which deviates completely from the classical metric measurement styles of writing Arabic poetry. Modern philosophical thoughts featured prominently and conspicuously in the works of many Mahjar poets and writers. Ilya Abu Madi was famous for his romantic styles as reflected in his *Lastu adri* (I do not know). Simplicity of language, theme and style was employed to make Arabic literature more fascinating and easily understandable like other modern literatures. This could be summed up in the following statement.

The members of the literary society Ar-Rabitatul Qalamiyyah (established in New York, 1920) were able to bring about a revolution in Arabic Poetry by using simple diction, style and stanzaic form with short metres, expressing them in various ways using techniques borrowed from drama and narratives and employing evocative symbols and new images. The members of this society were interested more in realizing the new principle in their own poetry (Granebaum, 1971)

### CONCLUSION

In this study, we have been able to trace the origin of a branch of modern Arabic literature that which evolved due to the eventful migration of some Syrian Arabs of Lebanese stock to the United States which took place in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as a result of tyrannical rulership of the Ottoman ruler, Sultan Abdul-Hamid. We focused mainly on the emigrants to the United States who founded the famous literary association named Ar-Rabitatul-Qalamiyyah.

The contributions of this literary movement and that of her sister organisation, Usbatul-Andalusiyy by emigrants to Latin American among formed the bases for the birth of what is known today as Mahjar School in Modern Arabic Literature. Moreover, two cultures came in contact; the Arab and western (American) cultures.

The western cultures overshadowed that of the Arabs because it was a time when historians categorise as the period of degeneration in the quality of Arabic literary production. However, the literary production in question was carried out in Diaspora and amidst foreign influences, in projection of Arabic culture and

civilization. The following excerpt from the preambles to the bye-laws of Ar-Rabitah better explains this.

This new movement aiming at transporting our literature from stagnation to life, from imitation to creation is worthy of all encouragement on the other hand, the tendency to keep our language and literature within the narrow bounds of aping the ancients in the form and substance is a most pernicious tendency if left unopposed it will soon lead to decay and disintegration. Yet we do not aim to break away completely from the ancient. For there be some among them who will remain to us and those who follow a source of inspiration for many ages to come. To revere them is a great honour. To imitate them is a deadly shame. For our life, our needs, our circumstances are far different from theirs (Nuaymah, 1965)

The end result of these cultural contacts gave birth to a hybrid culture; Arabo-American culture which was able to strike a balance between the two great cultures. It therefore goes that whatever the reasons or motives behind migration, cultural contacts especially in Diaspora could give birth to a new culture which may play prominent roles in promoting peaceful and harmonious living environments for members of the cultures that come in contact. It can also give birth to a hybrid form of literature as the case of Mahjar examined in the foregoing passages.

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