

## Hyphenation as a Reaction against the Fear

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**Abstract:**

The essays of the volume Arab American Literature and Culture investigate the various aspects of the identity and the expression of an "Arab-American culture" after the terrorist attacks of 9 September 2001. Drama, literature, movies, educational experiences, legal disquisitions, and news from the United States of today are contrastively analysed to illustrate the construction of an Arab-American Self as a reaction against the still-acting process of de-Americanization stemming from the policy of President Bush. Aesthetic and socio-political considerations make the volume an insightful work not only in the field of American Studies, but also in the domain of comparative literature and cultural transfer.

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Migration, social mobility, and spatial movement (i.e. diaspora or traveling) represent fundamental inputs to the encounter between cultures and the constitution of a dynamic model of cultural identity. But what happens, if the process of integration aiming for multiculturalism/interculturalism is interrupted by a historical event which unleashes the rage of a community onto the element of internal "decoherence"? The attack of 9/11 and the following discriminating policies of G. W. Bush's administrations "undermined the traditionally stable position of Arab immigrants within American society" (p. 1). In reaction, social anthropology and cross-cultural studies on the scientific side and cultural institutions on the social-pedagogical side intensified their work to contrast instances of the "de-Americanisation" of Americans of Middle Eastern and South Asian descent. As its editors announce, the volume Arab American Literature and Culture has a 'political' relevance. Even after more than 10 years have passed since the events of 9/11, it inserts itself into the constant process of intercultural reaction on occasion of Barack Obama's campaigning for the reelection "against a conservative agenda" (p. 2). In this volume, Alfred Hornung and Martina Kohl release in book format for the first time articles that originally appeared in a special issue of the online American Studies Journal.

The book consists of thirteen articles centering on the question of the Arab American identity as it emerges in different domains of culture, art, and society. Some papers arise directly from teaching experiences: Ghada Quaisi Gaudi's conference held for teachers of English from all over Germany, for instance, focuses on the discrimination against Arabian Americans and the violation of the US Constitution; R. D. Theis's paper carefully presents a Landeskunde-project entitled "Muslims in the U.S." and realized in the context of EFL classes in German High Schools; Mita Banerjee and Günther Sommerschuh's text illustrates an intercultural work carried out by EFL German students about stereotypes of Arab descent in the Hollywood movie *The Wind and the Lion* and about the influence of media on society.

The part dedicated to literature and media is introduced by Lisa S. Majaj's meaningful contribution examining origins and evolutions of Arab American literature – from the "Mahjar school" through Nye's poetry and on to the "feminist Arab American writing in English" and the newest novelists and playwrights. Presenting highly illustrative works, Majaj successfully depicts themes (nostalgia, memory, exile, the woman condition) voicing the tension existing

between pressures to Americanize and attempts to preserve ethnic identity in the Arab American authors. The thematic approach turns out to be fruitful in the article, as it permits interesting considerations about aesthetics and literature theory (i.e. the preponderant role played by the genre of poetry in the past) and about integration and culture. As a result, Majaj comes to the conclusion that the research of literary studies should centre on "cultural identity" – in other terms, the inner space constructed on dialectic interaction between selfhood and environment, instead of "ethnic identification".

This concept of identity intended as a "shifting category" and as "something one does, rather than something one has" (p.174) is fittingly explained in Silke Schmidt's work on the oriental dance. Her analysis of the distinction between ethnicity and race raises the issue of the (un-)hyphenated adjective "Arab(-)American" as well as that of U.S. politics on human rights. Schmidt's aim is to present an integrated model of hyphenation between different ethnic roots and, starting from the anthropological meaning of dance, to illustrate how the element of dance in women's literature contributes to the construction of such a model. Schmidt's paper is relevant and praiseworthy for its attempt to establish an interdisciplinary methodological model for future researchers and prove that "literary analyses have extra-literary relevance" (p. 211).

The handbook offers copious stimulus for reflection and represents an original contribution to the field of cross-cultural studies, as the above-described papers want to demonstrate. Interdisciplinarity, intermediality and comparative approach characterize most articles and are concerned with innovative domains, e.g. Alex Lubin's analysis of musical aspects and Suheir Hammad's performance poetry in hip hop connecting Palestinians and African Americans, or Mita Banerjee's reflections on integration and cultural identity based on the comparative study of *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini and the Hollywood film *True Lies*. Furthermore, the volume presents a considerable collection of the most significant literary and cultural expression of the last decade in the Arab American context.

Papers could have found a more organic distribution inside the book and have been gathered in chapters or sections. The political motivation of the work turns out to prevail over the aesthetic aspects in some articles. Nevertheless, the volume certainly succeeds in attesting to the peculiar scientific relevance of Arab American Studies and developing new contributions in this domain. Therefore, the handbook is highly recommended for researchers.