

Brave Expatriate New Worlds: Migration and Acculturation in Betty Shamieh's *Roar* and David Henry Hwang's *FOB*

Prof. Areeg Ibrahim
Helwan University, Egypt
areeg_mohamed@arts.helwan.edu.eg

ABSTRACT

Migrations usually carry feelings of apprehension and confusion, combined with a need for adjustment. Many expatriate societies have had to struggle with living between different worlds. Informed by migration studies, this interdisciplinary article combines readings in drama and the social sciences in order to analyze the way in which the experiences of expatriates are mainly attempts at forging new worlds. In Betty Shamieh's *Roar* (2005) the Arab American family has attempted to integrate their original culture with the American culture, however, the relationship between the old and new worlds remained in conflict. On the other hand, in David Henry Hwang's Asian American play, *FOB* (1980), the conflict is between the assimilated Asian Americans who have already been living in the host country and those newcomers, the "Fresh off the Boat". Most immigrant characters in the plays, whether first or second generation, face consequences of dislocation and thus demonstrate degrees of cultural and linguistic appropriation as they articulate their identity narrative whether of assimilation, separation, integration or marginalization.

Keywords: migration studies; Betty Shamieh; David Henry Hwang; identity narrative; appropriation.

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"O brave new world," he repeated. "O brave new world that has such people in it. Let's start at once."

"You have a most peculiar way of talking sometimes," said Bernard, staring at the young man in perplexed astonishment. "And, anyhow, hadn't you better wait till you actually see the new world?"

Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (166)

Dreaming of a new world is usually the primary motive for expatriates to leave their home countries and immigrate to host countries. However, these expatriate new worlds are not always utopias. For, as seen in the above epigraph by the famous English author Aldous Huxley (1894 - 1963) in his seminal dystopian novel *Brave New World* (1931), expectations of new worlds are not always realistic. The same can be said about expatriate new worlds in the US. Many migrants went there hoping for the rosy American dream. Yet, migrations usually carry feelings of expectations, apprehension and confusion, combined with a need for adjustment.

Many expatriate societies have had to struggle with living between different worlds. Informed by migration studies, cultural studies, and diaspora studies, this interdisciplinary article combines readings in drama and the social sciences in order to analyze the way in which the experiences of expatriates were mainly attempts at forging new worlds. In Betty Shamieh's *Roar* (2004) the Arab American family has attempted to integrate their original culture with the American culture, however, the relationship between the old and new worlds remained in conflict. On the other hand, in David Henry Hwang's Asian American play, *FOB* (1980), the conflict has been between the assimilated Asian Americans who have already been living in the host country and those newcomers, the "Fresh off the Boat". Most immigrant characters in both plays, Shamieh's *Roar* and David Henry Hwang's Asian American play, *FOB*, whether first or second generation, face consequences of dislocation and thus demonstrate degrees of cultural and linguistic appropriation as they articulate their identity narrative whether of assimilation, separation, integration or marginalization.

Migration studies has become a widely-spread scholarly field in the social sciences in the past three decades. Pisarevskaya, Levy, Scholten and Jansen assume that it has reached maturity in recent times. The focus of the field has changed during the late 20th century to focus on assimilation and ethnicity (457). During the 21st century, the shift seems to have been rather to integration. The focus of the social sciences varied between diversity, family, gender issues, socio-economic position, education, labor, discrimination and identity narratives (472-7). Since the 2000s there seems to be an increasing interest in diaspora and identity narratives (478). Moreover, diaspora which is associated with scattering and displacement is thus usually discussed in relation to ideas about “identity, memory and home” (Aschcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 218). Stuart Hall in “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” prefers to use the term “diaspora” not to refer to the “scattered tribes whose identity can only be secured in relation to some sacred homeland to which they must at all costs return, even if it means pushing other people into the sea” (235).

Migrations happen for many reasons and become an essential marker of identity formation. “If anything seems to characterize globalization at the turn of the century, it is the phenomenon of the extraordinary and accelerating movement of peoples throughout the world” (Aschcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 217). Stuart Hall believes that diaspora experience is defined by diversity, difference and hybridity (235). Similar to my proposition that diaspora communities in America are forging new worlds, Hall maintains that, “Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference” (235).

Many expatriates have experienced migration as part of their immediate or ancestral background and began a process of adaptation and acculturation. Their reaction to the host culture varied depending on both their personal and psychological make up and to a great extent on which generation of migrants they belong to. Sam and Berry believe that “[t]he meeting of cultures and the resulting changes are what collectively has come to be known as *acculturation*” (Intro 1). In the interaction between the original and host cultures, Berry differentiates between certain strategies: assimilation, separation, integration and marginalization in terms of maintenance of heritage culture and identity. Berry states,

when individuals do not wish to maintain their cultural identity and seek daily interaction with other cultures, the *assimilation* strategy is defined. In contrast, when individuals place a value on

holding on to their original culture, and at the same time wish to avoid interaction with others, then the *separation* alternative is defined. When there is an interest in both maintaining one's original culture, and having daily interactions with other groups, *integration* is the option; here, there is some degree of cultural integrity maintained, while at the same time the individual seeks, as a member of an ethnocultural group, to participate as an integral part of the larger social network. Finally, when there is little possibility of, or interest in, cultural maintenance (often for reasons of enforced cultural loss), and little interest in having relations with others (often for reasons of exclusion or discrimination) then *marginalization* is defined. (35)

That is to say, expatriates face several choices that shape their identity when they interact with their new worlds in terms of how much they assimilate the host culture values and tradition or hold onto their heritage culture. Overall, approaches towards hyphenated American identities have evolved, particularly with the nation developing from the melting pot mentality that favored similarities into embracing the salad bowl or multiculturalism that retains cultural differences.

One of the aspects of dealing with the cultural experiences is appropriation. According to Ascroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, “[a]ppropriation is the process by which the language is taken and [...] adopted as a tool and utilized in various ways to express widely differing cultural experiences” (Ascroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 38). In terms of interaction with a dominant Anglophone culture, varieties of the English language exist. That is, “[o]ne way to demonstrate an appropriated english is to contrast it with another still tied to the imperial centre” (Ascroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 58). While applied to the postcolonial context, the situation is also applicable to the way in which expatriates in the US interact with the English language of the host country.

When it comes to the experiences of the minorities in the US, Arab Americans have a unique and varying relationship to their host country. Many critics maintain that early Arab migrations in the 1930s to the United States of America were focused on assimilation and were mainly Syrian and Lebanese, identified in naturalization cases as “white”. Semaan maintains, “as these early immigrants recognized that America had become their permanent home, they were on their way to assimilate into the mainstream American culture” (5). Then, the need for assimilation diminished during the 1960s. Since that time many Arab American writers were inspired “to grapple with

the desire to re-write themselves” (Selim 294). Moreover, after 9/11, many of them needed to combat the negative stereotypes; and the focus became on self-identification. Theatre has become a suitable public platform to discuss and negotiate identity narratives of minorities in the US.

Betty Shamieh is a Palestinian American. Her famous plays include: *Chocolate in Heat*, *Roar* and *The Black Eyed*. In two Acts and ten Scenes, *Roar* (2004) is about a Palestinian American family living in Detroit, Michigan in 1991, during the first Gulf War. Karema and Ahmed Yacoub run a liquor store. Their teenage daughter, Irene, appears to rebel against the traditions of their original culture. Similar to Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*, the play attempts to represent the everyday life of an Arab American family, departing away from stereotypes.

The family tries to assimilate by hiding their Arab origins. Ahmed who works as a handyman for the apartments he rents, says, “American women think all Arab men are dirty” (1.1.4). In this case, the family has culturally appropriated and internalized the stereotypes assigned to their original culture by a more powerful host culture. Irene also tries to hide her Palestinian ancestry in order to be accepted as a blues singer in the American society. She says in the nightclub program that she is Egyptian. Ahmed justifies this that she needs to seem African to succeed as a blues singer. He tries to convince his skeptical wife:

AHMED: Karema, Irene sings the blues and that’s an African-American thing. Egypt is part of Africa, Palestine is technically_

AHMED:

KAREMA: (*at the same time*)

Part of Asia

I know where I’m from

AHMED: You look more legitimate...it is more strategic to package one’s self that way.

KAREMA: The only problem is she’s not.

AHMED: A blues singer with roots in the continent of Africa is an easy package to sell. Come on, Karema. Who in America has ever heard of a Palestinian blues singer? (1.1.5-6)

It is true that both Ahmed and Karema are first generation immigrants who were not born in the US, yet their take on things is different. Karema sees no reason to pretend they are not Palestinian. She seems to be more on the side of integration than assimilation. As for the uncle, Abe, he passes himself as an Egyptian Jew in order to fit in. In addition, Ahmed believes his daughter should not suffer because of her background in the Middle East. “AHMED:

Why should Irene suffer on account of politics she knows nothing about? I'm right about this and you know it" (1.1.6).

This Arab American family has a mix of values. Ironically, the family who is obviously Muslim because of Ahmed's name, does not try to hide the religious affiliation by changing Ahmed's name. On the other hand, Irene's name passes as a Western name. The use of the Arabic language is also connected to Karema, the first generation, especially when she first answers the phone and speaks to her sister Hala in Arabic. It is obvious at that moment that Irene did not understand, and Ahmed had to explain to her that he aunt was coming (1.1.7). Hala who is attached to the original Arab culture, embeds her sentences with a few Arabic words. For instance, she keeps repeating: "*Habibtey*" or "*my love*". In addition, Hala is fascinated with Arabic poetry and music and says, "I'm going to hum, sing and roar" (1.4.31); showing perhaps that the title is about emotional self-expression of one's origins to the fullest. On the other hand, the second generation, Irene does not share the same nostalgia to the Arabic language or music, but has appropriated cultural negativity towards Arabic; she says, "Arabic sounds so ugly. I never speak it in public. It sounds like spitting" (1.3.30). According to Abdalhafiz, "Irene represents the dilemma of almost all the second-generation American born immigrants"; they hide their heritage and attempt to assimilate (307). However, the family still holds onto the ethnic food (such as *falafel*), dance, music and the Middle Eastern embroidered tapestries. It is not clear though why they accept to open a liquor store when this would be against their traditional and religious values.

Another aspect of identity pertaining to home and memory is that both Hala and Karema have bad memories associated with Jordan during Black September (2.7.47). And because of these bad memories the sense of home is blurred for them. Hala and Ahmed feel nostalgic towards the Middle East and want to go back to Jordan where people can understand their music. That's why both Hala and Ahmed decide to go back. According to certain theories on identity, the emphasis can be "on the multiplicity of identities and differences rather than on a singular identity and on the connections or articulations between the fragments or differences" (Grossberg 89). So, it is possible that the characters in the play accept their differences and accept the multiple aspects of their identities and define themselves with fluidity.

As for Asian Americans, their migration was as early as the 16th and 17th centuries with Filipinos, Chinese, Korean and Japanese Americans. David

Henry Hwang (b. 1957) is a Chinese American playwright, famous for *Golden Child*, *FOB* and *M. Butterfly*. *FOB* is set in two acts (and two scenes) and discusses Asian stereotypes. Ironically,

In his plays, Hwang reinforces stereotypes, while simultaneously and paradoxically, undermining them. He deploys a multitude of theatrical elements, including racial casting choices and Orientalized costuming, that problematise the idea of identity as fixed and definable, and to exploit the physical nature of performance. (Johnson 24)

The title of the play, *FOB*, addresses stereotypes and means “Fresh Off the Boat” or the newcomer Asian immigrants who are supposed to fail as explains Dale, the second generation assimilated Asian American, or ABC (an American Born Chinese). He is contrasted to both Grace and Steve, first generation immigrants. Despite that at the beginning Steve was arrogant when he went to Grace in the restaurant, he is represented as embracing Chinese tradition when he asks for ‘bing” (or Chinese wheat cake). The playwright also introduces, or re-appropriates, elements of mythology (of Gwan Gung) associated with the Chinese tradition.

STEVE: Silence! I am Gwan Gung! God of warriors, writers and prostitutes! (1.1.11)

Grace stands up to Steve and calls herself “The Woman Who Has Defeated Gwan Gung” (1.1.13), bringing to mind the famous legend of the Woman Warrior, Fa Mu Lan. In her book, Torcky maintains that “Hwang’s delineation of two significant mythological figures from Chinese culture in *FOB* serves as a counter-attack against the Western assumptions, which confine Asian men and women to specific fixed patterns” (133-134). That is, Hwang shows that there are heroic Asian characters that differ from Western stereotypes of the East.

FOBs are represented as gasping after the illusionary American dream. When Grace invites her cousin, Dale, he refers to Steve as a FOB. And when Steve addresses the audiences as judges, he explains how he sees the American dream and calls America the “Mountain of Gold.” He says:

STEVE: [...] I come here five times _ I raise lifetime fortune five times. Five times, I first come here, you say to me I am illegal, you return me on boat to fathers and uncles with no gold, no treasure, no fortune, no rice. I only want to come to America _ come to “Mountain of Gold.” And I hate Mountain and I hate America and I hate you!” (1.1.21-22).

Dale internalizes the prejudices of the host culture and sees Steve from a stereotypical lens. He does not assume Steve is capable of making reservations at a French restaurant. He also assumes that Steve would choose a Chinese rather than a Western restaurant. Dale continues to mock Steve, saying, “FOBs can eat anything, huh? They’re specially trained. Helps maintain the characteristic greasy look” (1.2.30).

The play’s characters show different levels of assimilation or adherence to tradition. When they play the group story, Dale brings the story of the three bears in an American hospital. He does not allude to Chinese myths. As for Steve, he brings again Gwan Gung, symbolizing his adherence to tradition. Grace assumes again the role of Fa Mu Lan, the woman warrior, and draws her sword (2.45). After the make-believe battle in which grace stabs Steve with an invisible sword, she shows him compassion when he asks for food. Steve recognizes the importance of warriors over gods (2. 50). He overcomes his traditional prejudice against women and that is why Grace agrees to go with him.

When it comes to language, Steve fakes a heavy Chinese-accent English to reinforce Dale’s prejudices. This would be one type of the “englishes” referred to by Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin. Dale looks down upon a FOB with an accent. Dale thus reconsiders some of his prejudices and tells Steve, “I think you picked up English faster than anyone I’ve ever met” (2.50).

While Dale seems to represent the stand of assimilation, Steve appears to stand for marginalization. As for Grace, she represents a person who is able to integrate Eastern and Western values. She helps bridge the gap between assimilation and marginalization as represented by Dale and Steve.

To conclude, Betty Shamieh’s *Roar* (2004) and David Henry Hwang’s *FOB* (1980) show expatriate diasporic characters that are in the first place brave because by choosing to start in a new world; they accepted the challenge of dealing with uncertainty, confusion and unmet expectations. Their attempts are brave but it is contested if they truly managed to find the new worlds they were dreaming of. They sought to acculturate to and forge their new worlds. The plays represent some of the acculturation strategies used by the expatriate characters whether they stand for assimilation, separation, marginalization or integration. Arab Americans had to deal with negative religious and cultural stereotypes, and political realities. Asian Americans, on the other hand,

needed to combat stereotypes pertaining to their culture and tradition. Most characters in the plays, whether first or second generation, demonstrated degrees of cultural and linguistic appropriation in their attempts to express their fluid identities. They also have retained aspects of their homeland tradition, culture and language. Their identity narrative is shaped in relation to migration, adaptation and acculturation.

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