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ACADEMIA | Letters

Juana Dib, a Mahyar Poet

Marcus Palmer

The literary production of Arab immigrants in the Americas (*Adab al-mahyar*) has a rich history in the Americas. Referring to a place of exile or immigration, *Mahyar* is commonly used as a reference to the literature produced by Arab immigrant writers in North and South America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In Latin America, immigrant writers congregated in Brazil (*Andalusian Circle*, 1932), Argentina (*Literary League*, 1949), and Chile (*Al-Nadwa al-Adabiyya*, 1957). These *al-janubi* (Southern) authors produced poetry, essays, and journalistic articles dealing with a variety of topics, with a vast majority related to the immigrant experience. One of the most prominent themes in their prose and poetry was the homeland, whose image inspired nostalgia for their loved ones, and anxiety for the socio-political situations in countries of origin. Contemporary Latin American immigrant poets and authors of Arab heritage publish in several languages, reflecting aesthetic choice and linguistic competence.

Juana Dib (1924- 2015) was born in Salta, Argentina to Syrian parents who emigrated from Tumin, in the Hamah province. Dib produced a *diwan* that aligns with emigrant writing practices and examines the processes of cultural uprooting and loss of homeland. In and between the lines of her verses are expressions of immigration and memories yearning to recover culture, bridge continents, and trace family histories. The title of her collection *Las doradas* (1989) refers to the “The Hanging Poems” or “Suspended Odes” of Pre-Islamic poets hung in the Kaaba in Mecca and initiates the journey of a poetic voice that travels throughout the Levant regions, celebrating nature and offering homage to celebrated poets. Two poems in particular evidence the Dib’s exploration of her Arab heritage and tracing of family history.

“Siria” (Syria)

Porque nunca he podido columbrar a la bella,

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se me oprimen las rimas cuando añoro y escribo
y me vuelve el recuerdo, el recuerdo más vivo,
de mis padres que siempre me acercaban a ella.

*Because I have never discerned her beauty,¹
my rhyme is silent as I yearn and write,
a memory returns, a living memory
of my parents who forever drew her nearer to me.*

Y por eso de Oriente es que busco la estrella.
Si la encuentro en la noche del fulgor que recibo
y me siento embriagada en su hechizo cautivo,
el recuerdo que tengo en mis venas se sella.

*For, this why I seek from the Orient a star.
If I find it in the brilliance of the night
intoxicated, captive of its spell,
the memory I have in my veins is sealed.*

Si no puedo alcanzarla, si la veo alejarse...
y la estrofa amenaza en desierto quedarse,
me extasío en la rosa de la arena que tiene.

*If I cannot reach her, or if from me, she flees...
and the strophe risks being lost in the desert sea,
I will fall under the trance of its rose and sand.*

Si de prados del mar diviso a una diosa
y me entrega algún puerto como joya preciosa,
es que Siria por mí...con sus galas se viene.

¹Translation is mine

*If over ocean plains a Goddess draws near
bringing me a harbor as precious jewel,
Syria... in all her elegance is coming for me. (25)*

While the tones of nostalgia and loss align with sentiments in Arab emigrant poetry throughout the Americas, Dib's verses register these tropes as safeguarded heirlooms, as a mahyar inheritance. With these cultural treasures, the poet seeks to create a poetic imaginary of her ancestor's homeland, and in essence, walk the diasporic path of her ancestor's home.

"Vamos a America," (Let's go to America) the final poem in *Las doradas*, is specifically concerned with the trope of immigration and introduces a new poetic space —Salta, Argentina.

Vamos a América esposa
y verás que buena es ella.
Yo ya elegí la Argentina
Para que sea vivienda
*Wife, let's go to America,²
and you will see how great she is.
I've already chosen Argentina
to be our home.*

[...]

Verás que linda que es Salta
Con callecitas de piedra,
Con sus coches de paseo
y sus gentes todas buenas
*You'll see the beauty of Salta,
with little cobblestone streets
and travel carriages,
and its wholesome people. (130-31)*

²Translation is mine

The line, “you will see” suggests the poetic voice had personally visited Salta or received a letter from family members abroad describing the natural beauty. Indeed, several short stories Dib’s *Las invitadas* (The Invited) include the portrayal of Arab immigrants sending correspondence and gold coins to family members in their homeland. “Let’s go to America,” provides insights into the mindset of Arab emigrants reasoning their decision to leave home and establish themselves in a new homeland. It is worth noting that this poem bridges two collections of poetry: *Las doradas* (1989) and *Las dos vertientes* (1993). While in *Las doradas* Dib celebrates pre-islamic and Arab cultures, *Las dos vertientes* (The Two Springs) is a continuation of this poetic journey, tracing family history from the Levant to Argentina.

Historically, critics study the *Mahyar* and Arab American literature from an East-West dichotomy with very little attention to the South. My readings of Juana Dib’s in Latin America’s *Mahyar* illuminates the importance of “literary genealogies” and “mahyar inheritance” as a writing practices for contemporary writers of Arab ancestry. The literary production of contemporary writers of Arab heritage trace identity formations from the Americas across multiple historical contexts to engage in social and political criticism. Thematic concerns of these Arab American writers explore cultural and linguistic identification with the Orient, but also evidences perennial social issues such as discrimination and violence against Arab communities, and exposes gender inequality, femicide, and the objectification of women. This research serves Arab communities throughout the Americas by raising awareness of diverse manifestations of culture and identities, but more importantly, open pathways for increased collaboration and outreach initiatives.

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