## Dehegemonizing the Canon of American Literature for Arab University Students

إزالة الهيمنة من منهج الأدب الأمريكي للطلبة العرب في الجامعات العربية

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#### Abstract

The sociopolitical realities in the Arab World and their relationship with the United States require that Arab professors of American literature at Arab Universities revise their syllabi and textbooks so that they do not serve the American hegemony on the Arab World. The researcher calls for preparing an anthology of American literature that responds to the national aspirations of Arab students without compromising quality or the inclusiveness of the American canon. The anthology that the researcher envisions is that which would include the giants of American literature along with a significant representation of ethnicity and gender; it would introduce American literature to students in an authentic and critical manner that revises the standing canon in favor of reconstructing a canon that is more relevant to Arab students in Arab universities and that prepares them to be citizens of the world.

**Key Words**: The American literary canon, American literature at Arab universities, hegemony and literature, Twain and the Arabs, the politics of canon formation and deformation.

### ملخص

تستدعي الوقائع السياسية والإجتماعية في العالم العربي وعلاقتها بالولايات المتحدة الأمريكية من أساتذة الأدب الأمريكي في الجامعات العربية مراجعة خططهم الدراسية ومقرراتهم التعليمية بحيث لا تخدم الهيمنة الأمريكية على العالم العربي. يدعو الباحث في هذه الدراسة إلى اعداد انثولوجيا للأدب الأمريكي بحيث تستجيب للطموحات الوطنية للطلبة العرب دون المساس بالجودة أو الشمولية لمنهاج الأدب الأمريكي المعروف. الأنثولوجيا التي ينشدها الباحث تحتوي على عمالقة الأدب الأمريكي إلى جانب تمثيل للعرقيات والنوع الإجتماعي. ويمكن أن تقدم هذه الأنثولوجيا الأدب الأمريكي بثوب حقيقي وناقد، يقوم بتقويض المنهاج المتداول بغرض إعداد منهاج اخر يكون أكثرتمثيلا للمتطلبات الثقافية، لطلبة الأدب الأمريكي في الجامعات العربية، ناشدا بذلك اعدادهم لمتطلبات المواطنة العالمية.

كلمات مفتاحية: انثولوجيا الأدب الأمريكي، الأدب الأمريكي في الجامعات العربية، الهيمنة و الأدب، مارك توين و العرب، سياسة الإقصاء و الإستحواذ.

### Introduction

The formation of any canon in the curricula of schools and universities can be responsible for forming the future of a nation. Editors of major texts usually decide for us what to learn and what to unlearn and our knowledge of the world is influenced by their biases and prejudices. In most cases students do not question texts that are given to them and teachers find it convenient to assign a ready-made textbook, even if they disagree with its content, rather than compile their own material for their students. While it may not be possible for each teacher to write, edit or prepare his/her own textbook for his/her students, it is always possible for teachers to combine efforts to prepare a textbook that responds to their students' needs, expectations and ambitions. It is also important for professors to periodically update their textbooks so that they continue to offer to their students what agrees with their educational needs.

Canon formation is generally influenced by a myriad of factors related to the political, social, economic and other educational realities. There is no doubt that the political, social and economic developments that the Middle East is experiencing are sources of concern that compel academics to revise their syllabi and the textbooks that they assign to their students so that the offered information can be conducive to the

intended learning outcomes. Arab professors need to be alerted to the need for introducing to their students the texts that are congruent with their national aspirations and biases without obliterating any vital information that would deter them from catching up with the international educational challenges.

This study tries to show that the present available anthologies of American literature that we put in the hands of our students are not necessarily the best that we can offer. The researcher calls for preparing an anthology of American literature that can be both representative of the major trends and literary figures and responsive to the needs of Arab students without compromising quality and inclusiveness. The Anthology that the researcher envisions is that which would include the giants of American literature along with significant representations of ethnicity and gender. It would introduce American literature to students in an authentic and critical manner that deconstructs the standing canon in favor of reconstructing a canon that is more appealing to Arab students in Arab universities and more responsive to the needs of integration in world culture. This study focuses on 19th century American literature since it informs the following century while retaining links with the Puritan past. After reading Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Hemingway wrote "All American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn* ---- it's the best book we've had ----- There was nothing before. There has been nothing so good since." (Mailer, retrieved on 12/6/2010 from: http://www.nytimes.com/ 1984/12/09/books/mailer-huck.html). Nathaniel Hawthorne was obsessed with the Puritan past; his novels and short stories capture a sense of belongness to a heritage that Hawthorne longed to dissociate himself from while clinging to its powerful dictations on the American collective subconscious.

The writers and works that are treated in this study are only meant to be a representative demonstration of the disadvantages of the American canon and its anthologies that we use in our American literature courses at Arab universities that confer undergraduate and graduate degrees in English and/or American literature.

### The Teaching of American Literature at Palestinian Universities

Since the introduction of English literature as a discipline in Arab universities in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, American literature has been listed among the compulsory courses on the syllabi of the majority of Departments of English that grant the BA degree in English language and literature. In addition to American literature as a survey course, American literary works are integrated in other courses that deal with different literary genres such as poetry, drama, the novel and the short story, in addition to some general introductory courses on literature, modern literature, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century literature, to name only few.

Educators at that time showed much enthusiasm for a literature which was to be recognized as an independent canon separate from British literature. To them American literature introduced a variety of themes and topics such as the Afro-American experience which appealed to Palestinian students. Palestinian students as well as many other students in the Arab World looked up to American literature since it connotes the virtues of self reliance, originality, democracy and freedom. The cult of self reliance that was implanted by the founding fathers of the American republic such as Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson and was reiterated in the dogma of the transcendentalists of the nineteenth century appealed to young people in every part of the world.

After the Beirut War in 1982, the Palestinian Intifada in 2000 and the war on Iraq in 2003 nemesis fell; American political leaders lost credibility in the eyes of both the average Palestinian person and the educated elite at universities. Enthusiasm for the literature, the culture, the language or anything American has been reversed, so much so that instructors of American literature are in a dilemma. On the one hand they want to keep the programs of study at their universities intact, and on the other they share the worries and repulsions that their students have with the conviction that it is not possible to overlook the great values that American literature contains.

In their search for a compromise, some professors of American literature at Arab universities began attempts to deconstruct the current American canon in favor of reconstructing another one that would suit the preference of their students and restore their interest in American literature. Professors of British and American literature in Palestinian universities in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip often deliberate the standing canon used in their departments. Basem Ra'ad a professor of English literature who served in more than one Palestinian university reiterated his concern regarding the teaching of not only American literature but Western literature in an Arab context as well. Ra'ad shows his dissatisfaction with the way Western literature is taught at Palestinian universities in a paper that he circulated among colleagues in different Palestinian universities in March 2005 describing it as "very traditional" and he opted for developing "an eclectic and composite approach that benefits from the new trends in some respects but that is able to provide introspective relevance to my students and to myself also. So that even in standard courses such as period surveys, I now try to restructure and update course outlines in such a way as to draw out actual implications, parallels, lessons that relate to our identity and to developments that are now forming our history and transforming our culture" (2005, 2). Ra'ad as and many of his colleagues in Palestinian universities agree that there is a need to reconsider syllabi and textbooks if Palestinian students are to integrate in world culture without losing sight of their national aspirations.

### The Politics and Poetics of Canon Formation

Canon formation and deformation of American literature has stirred hot debates since the civil rights movement and it gained momentum during the rest of the second part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The canon of the antebellum sensibilities and biases continued to hold for several decades in 20<sup>th</sup> century anthologies of American literature. The rise of ethnic literature with its new realities and the emergence of postcolonial and feminist literature in different parts of the world brought about new perceptions and more daring calls for reformations in the American

canon. The traditions of canon formation of American literature have been biased and misled by political and ethnocentric orientations. F.O. Matthiessen, one of the major critics of American literature whose major work, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (which was first published in 1941) defines the American Renaissance as the 19<sup>th</sup> century with very special focus on the 1850s. Matthiessen cites the American masterpieces which were published in the mid decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century admiring the prolific production of writers, their style, their passion and, on top of all, their "imaginative vitality".

The half-decade of 1850-55 saw the appearance of *Representative Men* (1850), *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), *Moby-Dick* (1851), *Pierre* (1852), *Walden* (1854), and *Leaves of Grass* (1955). You might search all the rest of American literature without being able to collect a group of books equal to these in imaginative vitality. (1968: vii)

Matthiessen's canonization of American literature continues to represent the literary and cultural right of antebellum aesthetics when, according to Henry Gates, "men were men, and men were white, when scholar-critics were white men, and when women and persons of color were voiceless, faceless servants and laborers, pouring tea and filling brandy snifters in the boardrooms of old boys' clubs" (1992:17)

Men of color and women of all colors are completely absent from Matthiessen's major book on literary criticism which continues even in our present time to be one of the major sources of criticism on 19<sup>th</sup> century American literature. In the same decade (the 1850s) that Matthiessen uses as his focal point, Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) was published and it was the second most popular book of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (the first being the Bible). (Winship, retrieved on 10/6/2010 from: <a href="http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/interpret/exhibits/winship/winship.html">http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/interpret/exhibits/winship/winship.html</a>). The novel is said to have instigated the Civil War and to be responsible for the creation of stereotypes about the blight of black people in America and to have inspired several writers hence after (Winship, retrieved: 10/6/2010). But Matthiessen chooses to exclude Stowe, other

female writers and Afro-American writers from his critical canon; not even Emily Dickinson is mentioned in Matthiessen's book.

Calls for canonizing gender and ethnic literature on the bases of its sensibilities and its representation of a world culture and not on its descent came at a later stage. While The Norton Anthology stands as the most prominent anthology of American literature, it pays casual reference to ethnic literature. American editors have always been engaged in hot debates on canonizing certain American writers and there are serious trends that attempt to incorporate a good number of ethnic writers. Paul Lauter's The Heath Anthology of American Literature (1990) is one of the latest successful anthologies of the kind. Paul Lauter, however, denies the existence of any significant Arab American writer who may be worthy of being anthologized; his anthology does not include any Arab Americans, not to mention Palestinian writers. This deliberate or indeliberate effacement of the representation of Arab writers as an ethnic group in America will certainly shake the credibility of the anthology itself since the existence of Arab American writers was recognized a century or more before the publication of The Heath Anthology, particularly through the works of Gibran K. Gibran, and the other émigré Arab writers of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The *Grape* Leaves Poets (1988) anthology of El-Mosa and Orfelea's was another fresh source that was published only two years before the Heath Anthology. One should not be in the position of defending the recognition of Arab American writers as part of an ethnic canon or any other canon of American literature because any literature should speak of itself and Arab American writers have remarkable and conspicuous presence in the American literary scene. What is interesting is that after being criticized by many professors, scholars and students for the absence of Arab American writers, Paul Lauter included Naomi Shihab Nye in the fifth edition of the Heath Anthology. But Naomi Shihab is an established Palestinian American writer whose poems were popular as early as the 1980s.

Since The *Heath Anthology* includes writers from almost all cultures regardless of how significant or insignificant that literature is to the

American taste and temperament, why would an editor as well known as Paul Lauter try to obliterate the Arab ethnic and literary representation from his anthology?

### The Politics of Exclusion

Within the context of fighting terror first by bullet and then by disseminating democratic values among people of Third World countries, there lurks the horror of the Holocaust. Ironically, the West, and particularly the Unites States, is taking every possible caution that the Hiroshima catastrophe and the Holocaust tragedy may not be repeated in the world with the implication that if they are to be repeated it is very likely that the people of the Third World (particularly the Arabs) are those to fear. But history tells that the Holocaust and Hiroshima are the industry of the West and if they are to happen again it is very likely that the West will repeat them and not Arab or Muslim countries. Paul Lauter may not be interested in viewing a holocaust other than that of the Jews; nor any prejudice other than that which was committed against the European Jews.

Following World War II, the image of the Holocaust became the nightmare of writers and continued to dominate the literary scene down to our present time. The several holocausts committed in different parts of the Arab World such as Iraq, Palestine and Lebanon and the subsequent displacements of hundreds of thousands of refugees do not by any means seem to convince the perpetrators of these crimes that their crimes against humanity rise to the level of the Jewish Holocaust and Diaspora.

We may be aware of the political biases of editors, but part of the reason behind excluding Arab American writers probably has to do with themes undertaken by their compatriot modern Arab (and particularly Palestinian) writers in their homeland. The 20<sup>th</sup> century Arab literature is charged with themes that are now postcolonial, now vehemently resistant agonizing at the "bleeding" borders almost everywhere in the Arab World and amounting to more pathetic diasporas and holocausts. The authors of the misery of Arab World countries are viewed by many

writers as Israel, the United States and England. The Arab average person finds himself both a victim of the colonizer's greed for his resources and the cruelty of his US backed regime. This reality continues until resistance and freedom fighting were nakedly and viciously dumped as acts of terror by the 1990s. In order for the super power (the USA) to "tame these Arabs" and help them out of their 'heathen' misery the American government needs to export American democracy to them while supporting their dictator regimes: a very uncanny paradox.

While Arab people are unable to come to terms with their rulers, anguish and loss continue. The Arab is walled in and out in different ways and any attempt to end his siege is aborted by outside and inside tactics. Egyptian migrant workers swarm the Egyptian cities famishing for food and shelter. Moroccan's borders "bleed" with illegal immigrants who sneak through the Mediterranean to the coasts of Spain seeking some seasonal employment in olive cultivation in the same way Palestinian Arabs sneak through Israeli borders seeking a job that in some cases costs them their lives. The survivors from among Egyptian migrant workers, Moroccan illegal immigrants and the Palestinian workers recount stories which are unmatched in their capturing of the agony, molestation and abuse of such free men and women. What Kanafani captures in Men in the Sun (1999) of Palestinian illegal immigrants "bleeding" through the borders of Kuwait and Iraq is an authentic example of the suffering of these workers who are displaced by the cruel hand of their colonizers. "Why didn't they knock on the sides of the tank" (Kanafani, 1999:74) Abul Khaizuran, the main character of Kanafani's Men in the Sun ejaculates after he discovers and disposes of the bodies of the "baked" men in his tank while trying to cross them the borders from Iraq to Kuwait. What knocks and what shouts would awaken the dead conscience of the proud gods of this earth?! Arab American writers lie uneasy while they hear of their countries being ransacked by the tyranny of occupiers.

In "Blood" the American Palestinian poet Naomi Shihab monitors with her father the news from the beleaguered homeland and laments 20<sup>th</sup>

century civilization which permits such atrocities against the helpless and the innocent:

Today the headlines clot in my blood.

A little Palestinian dangles a truck on the front page.

Homeless fig, this tragedy with a terrible root

is too big for us. What flag can we wave?

I wave the flag of stone and seed,

table mat stitched in blue.

I call my father, we talk around the news.

It is too much for him,

neither of his two languages can reach it.

I drive into the country to find sheep, cows,

to plead with the air:

Who calls anyone *civilized*?

Where can the crying heart graze?

What does a true Arab do now? (Naomi Shihab in Orfalea & Elmusa, 1988: 273)

Arab American writers do respond to their surrounding realities, but not without a frequent declared allegiance to their home towns and countries. Their literature is, therefore, excluded. Moreover, the stereotypical image of the Arab in the West is that which does not encourage Western editors to consider anthologizing. The orientalists of the previous century created the orient as a different 'other' that they enjoyed hating. They, as Said, notices in his *Orientalism* (1979) placed themselves at the center of the universe and saw and created an "other" with reference to their logocentric vision that is both hegemonic and exclusive.

For Orientalism was ultimately a political vision of reality whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, 'us') and the strange (the Orient, the East, 'them'). This vision in a sense created and then served the two worlds thus conceived. Orientals lived in their world, 'we' lived in ours. The vision and material reality propped each other up, kept each other going. A certain freedom of intercourse was always the Westerner's privilege; because his was the stronger, he could penetrate, he could wrestle with, he could give shape to the great Artistic mystery as Disraeli called it. (1979: 44)

American readers need to unlearn several things about the orient before they can commit their memories to new realities. The unfair exclusion and alienation of an ethnic minority from the American literary canon led to serious consequences. Not only is the American canon exclusive, it is somewhat antagonistic and stereotypical. The call is not for a special ethnic anthology that counters the hegemony of the West with similar antagonism and stereotyping; the call is for a sound integration on the basis of merit of all ethnic groups into the American canon. It does not sound fair and sound to see the epigrams of Gibran K. Gibran on every post card and wall hanging, to have a memorial garden for him in Washington D.C., and not have him included in an anthology that claims an ethnic approach to American literature.

# Xenophobic Attitude towards Arabs and Foreigners in 19<sup>th</sup> Century American Literature: the Examples of Mark Twain and Herman Melville

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century American travel literature served to acquaint people with the foreign cultures and countries that seafarers visited and reported from to the people of their countries who were eager to know about the outside world and particularly the Holy Land. Several 19<sup>th</sup> century writers including some of the giants of the period such as Herman Melville, and Mark Twain, visited the Holy Land with the intention of acquainting themselves first and their readers second with the birthplace of the Savior. Their reports were published either in books or in the newspapers of the time. Melville, for example wrote *Clarel*, an

epic that captures his epiphanies about the Holy Land and Twain's participation in the *Quaker City* journey to Europe and the Holy Land in 1867 was actually sponsored by the *Alta California*, a San Francisco paper that aimed at publishing the reports that Twain sent periodically to quench the thirst of readers for such information about the outside world and particularly the Holy Land.

After his visit to the Holy Land in 1867, Mark Twain went back to America with a set of stereotypes about Arabs and particularly those who lived in Palestine that are now offending to Arabs and now insultingly comic leaving little room for an Arab (particularly a Palestinian Arab) to appreciate. Twain's prejudice against Arabs climaxes in his popular novel Huckleberry Finn (1884). In one of the episodes of the novel, the two racketeers, referred to as the Duke and the King, go in one of their excursions into an American village on the banks of the Mississippi river. Their racketeering business requires them to leave Jim (the fugitive slave) in the boat alone until they come back from their adventure. In order for them to avoid passersby's doubts that Jim is a runaway slave, the Duke dressed Jim up in King Lear's outfit – it was a long curtaincalico gown, and a white horse-hair wig and whiskers; and then he took his theatre-paint and painted Jim's face and hands and ears and neck all over a dead dull solid blue, like a man that's been drowned nine days. Blamed if he war'nt the horriblest looking outrage I ever see. Then the duke took and wrote out a sign on a shingle so –

Sick Arab – but harmless when not out of his head. (1985:1210)

Twain puts the words in the mouth of one of his characters, the Duke. But we "commonly do not remember", to put it in Thoreau's words, "that it is the first person that is always speaking." (2003:1808) Twain succeeded in marketing his stereotypical ideas to 19<sup>th</sup> century Americans who were thirsty for knowledge about the Holy Land and whose source of information was mainly through the travel literature the like of that which was produced by the pilgrims of the Holy Land. A little exercise in discourse analysis of the above quotation from *Huckleberry Finn* leads to the following conclusions: An Arab according to Twain's stereotyping is harmful and in most cases he is out of his mind. An Arab

is a source of danger; getting close to him would be an unnecessary risk that one should avoid. Playing with the color prejudice of the time, Twain makes the Duke paint "Jim's face and hands and ears and neck all over a dead dull solid blue." In addition to the image of madness which is informed by the character of Shakespeare's *King Lear* (the play that the Duke and the King fake in *Huckleberry Finn*), Jim's black color was not representative enough of an Arab according to Twain; he chooses to paint him with a "dull solid blue" color preparing for the later "sand nigger" stigma that is attributed to Arabs in twentieth century America.

In their travel to the Orient, Western scholars and pilgrims came to know the Orient so that they own it. These pilgrims developed a "Holy Land Mania" in their frequent attempts to discover the Orient with its "voluptuous" and "exotic" charm. Knowledge of the Orient was power since these travelers came to the Orient at a time when the Ottoman Empire was dying and when Western countries began to compete to its usurpation. They also came with ethnocentric feelings that were charged with hegemony and a sense of power that is both condescending and defiling.

It is with this hegemonic attitude that the orientalists approached the Orient and its people. In his 'pilgrimage' to the Holy Land as recorded in *Innocents Abroad*, Twain and his group were charged with blind religious prejudice that made them only see through a narrow perspective, leaving no room for the "other". While in Nain, a village in the Galilee, the pilgrims (Twain's group) take license to profane a mosque and deplore Arabs' tolerance simply because they felt that they and their faith is superior to that of the Arabs:

A little mosque stands upon the spot which tradition says was occupied by the widow's dwelling. Two or three aged Arabs sat about its door. We entered, and the pilgrims broke specimens from the foundation walls, though they had to touch, and even step, upon the "praying carpets" to do it. It was almost the same as breaking pieces from the hearts of those old Arabs. To step rudely upon the sacred praying mats, with booted feet--a thing not done by any Arab--was to inflict pain upon men who had not offended us in any way. Suppose a party of armed

foreigners were to enter a village church in America and break ornaments from the altar railings for curiosities, and climb up and walk upon the Bible and the pulpit cushions? However, the cases are different. One is the profanation of a temple of our faith--the other only the profanation of a pagan one. (1976: 534)

Twain places himself in a category which is too haughty to accept the "other". In this case, he belongs to a "temple" of faith different from that of the "pagans" (Arabs). He and his group, therefore, took the license to profane their temple by walking with booted feet on the "praying carpets" and to break specimens from its foundations even though they knew that such behavior was "almost the same as breaking pieces from the hearts of those old Arabs" who never offended them and who showed generous hospitality to the man and his group. Twain seems to marvel at this curious thing: Arabs do not rise to defend their faith like an American would. He, however, gives the justification that their faith is "pagan" and not worthy of their protest at ransacking its symbols.

As he tours the holy places in Jerusalem, Twain talks about the patriarchs of Christianity and Judaism with a sense of allegiance to them as if they did not one day belong to the region which originated them. So he would say here "the boy Jesus has stood in this doorway--has played in that street--has touched these stones with his hands--has rambled over these chalky hills, here is the place where John stood and where Mary Magdalene [stood], here is where David saw Uriah's wife coming from the bath and fell in love with her, and here is where Samuel walked", (Twain, 1976: 345) disregarding that these same patriarchs are the ancestors of these Arabs that he now detests.

In an unjustified outrage Twain launches another attack at Arabs on the ground that they refuse to eat from food cooked by Christians feigning ignorance of the fact that if Muslims do not eat from food made by non-Muslims, it is only because they do not want to run the risk of eating pork or unholy meat of animals killed in a non-Islamic way.

It hurts my vanity to see these pagans refuse to eat of food that has been cooked for us; or to eat from a dish we have eaten from; or to drink

from goatskin which we polluted with our Christian lips, except by filtering the water through a rag which they put over the mouth of it or through a sponge! I never disliked a Chinaman as I do these degraded Turks and Arabs, and, when Russia is ready to war with them again, I hope England and France will not find it good breeding or good judgment to interfere. (1976: 268)

It seems that the epiphany that 19<sup>th</sup> century American pilgrims, including, of course, Twain, experienced as they visited the Holy Land was so extreme that it led them to reevaluate their faith and their adherence to their religious symbols. Twain had great expectations of the Holy Land that amounted to ignorance. He says that he had to unlearn so many things about Palestine before he committed his memory to the new realities that he encountered. The new realities are unpleasant epiphanies:

The commonest sagacity warns me that I ought to tell the customary pleasant lie, and say I tore myself reluctantly from every noted place in Palestine. Everybody tells that, but with as little ostentation as I may, I doubt the word of every he who tells it. I could take a dreadful oath that I have never heard any one of our forty pilgrims say anything of the sort, and they are as worthy and as sincerely devout as any that come here. They will say it when they get home, fast enough, but why should they not? They do not wish to array themselves against all the Lamartines and Grimesses in the world. It does not stand to reason that men are reluctant to leave places where the very life is almost badgered out of them by importunate swarms of beggars and peddlers who hang in strings to one's sleeves and coat-tails and shriek and shout in his ears and horrify his vision with the ghastly sores and malformation they exhibit. One is *glad* to get away. (1976: 359)

Herman Melville was trapped in his ambivalence and his search for faith when representing the Orient such as the cases of *Clarel* and *Moby Dick*, but he unfortunately does not refrain from displaying a similar prejudice, if only incidental, in one of the most culturally neutral of his novels, *Billy Budd*. Billy Budd in the novel is Christ-like, a peacemaker, a romantic hero and idol, and a character whom we admire for all the physical and spiritual beauty that he possesses. Billy is English by birth

and not by naturalization. His adversary, John Claggart, the Master-at-Arms on board of Bellipotent, who represents wickedness and evil, is not innately English; he is a naturalized Englishman. He obtained his citizenship by naturalization and not by birth. He is a swindler who is impressed in service after being arraigned before a court of law and was given the choice of going to sea with the navy or going to jail. But Melville does not leave it there; he dramatizes this concept of citizenship after the accidental death of Claggart on the hands of Billy. *News from the Mediterranean* reports the death of the Master-at-Arms in a very warped manner. Billy becomes the foreign assassin, and Claggart becomes the native victim.

The deed and the implement employed, sufficiently suggest that tho' mustered into the service under an English name the assassin was no Englishman, but one of those aliens adopting English cognomens whom the present extraordinary necessities of the Service have caused to be admitted into it in considerable numbers. (2003: 2485)

For Melville, and many other American writers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, foreignness is a source of evil and mischief not minding the fact that all American settlers were foreigners to the American soil. Claggart embodies foreignness and evil; he is devious, deceptive, diabolic and "there lurks a bit of accent in his speech suggesting that he was not such [being an Englishman] by birth, but through naturalization in early childhood" (2003: 2445)

In *Clarel*, Melville seems to be more involved with Jewish people. Clarel, the main character falls in love with a Jewish girl (Ruth) whose father is murdered by "Arab Murderers". Melville could not free himself from the stereotypical image of the Arab that he is conditioned to accept and promote. It is common to find murderers in every culture and in every nation and having someone killed by a murderer is not uncommon. What is uncommon is that such information is twisted by present day critics to serve and feed stereotypical images. For example Kevin Hayes (2007) in his *The Cambridge Introduction to Herman Melville*, replaces the word murderers with "Arab terrorists" to suit the taste of twenty-first

century Western readers who are already conditioned to accept such phraseology without questioning.

The cases of Twain and Melville are not the only ones. The interest in the Orient was manifested in different ways. Washington Irving wrote *Life of Mohammad*, and the *Lives of Mahomet and His Successors* which are based on several misconceptions about the prophet and his life. Despite the fact that Irving demonstrates familiarity with Islam, the Quran and the prophet and his successors, he does not give credit to his knowledge of the Quran in his "Rip Van Winkle"—a short story whose plot is centered on Rip who sleeps in the Kaatskill mountains for 20 years and who, after waking up goes to his village confused and puzzled at his strange surroundings. In the postscript of the story Irving claims that he found the story among the manuscripts of a (fictitious) German historian by the name of Diedrich Knickerbocker when we know that the story is a typical imitation of the Quranic story "The People of the Cave"

Such prejudice and narrow stereotyping condoned and perpetrated by significant writers, critics and editors were to a great extent responsible for the xenophobic attitude of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the twentieth century stereotyping and prejudice increased to immeasurable levels especially after World War II which bequeathed the holocaust and its hegemonic consequences. One may not underestimate the impact of Twain's stereotyping of Arabs because in *Innocents Abroad*, Twain's expected humor is replaced with an ethnocentric attitude mixed with lack of religious tolerance and unjustified antagonism.

### Twain and the Question of Palestine

Mark Twain's prejudice is generally pardoned by virtue of his humor especially that he does not spare any race of his mockery. What may not be pardoned is the prejudice in canonizing Twain. Twain's "Concerning the Jew", for example, is hardly heard of or anthologized, but certain chapters from the different works of Twain that mock Arabs are somewhat highlighted. *Innocents Abroad* became a very popular book; by the year 1910 more than half a million copies were sold (Obenzinger, 1997). Twain's xenophobic attitude towards Arabs and Muslims entailed

the creation of stereotypes that continue to impinge on the consciousness of some Americans to our present day. An Arab, for Twain, is an ignorant, dirty, heathen nomad whose faith is pagan and whose harsh and deserted environment is so unfriendly. 19<sup>th</sup> century Palestinian Arabs to Twain were "ill clad and ill-conditioned savages much like our Indians" (Twain, 1976: 283). As he traveled in Palestine he saw barren and empty surroundings.

The allegations that Twain makes about Palestine as being an "empty" country, and that he and his group traveled several miles between Ramallah and Nablus without seeing inhabitants were used by Jewish lobbyists to prepare the scene for the ill-omened Belfour Declaration later in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. During a visit to the White House in May, 2009, Netanyahu, the prime minister of Israel gave to President Obama a copy of "Pleasure Excursion to the Holy Land" which is an excerpt from *Innocents Abroad*. The purpose of his gift was to point to the US President that Palestine as presented by Twain during the time of the Ottoman Empire was barren and that Jerusalem was with a population of only 14 thousands of different religious denominations and races. "It seems to me," Mark Twain wrote in his Innocent Abroad, "that all the races and colors and tongues of the earth must be represented among the fourteen thousand souls that dwell in Jerusalem. Rags, wretchedness, poverty and dirt, those signs and symbols that indicate the presence of Moslem rule more surely than the crescent-flag itself, abound." (1976: 328).

'Wretchedness, poverty and dirt' aside, in reality statistics show that "The land of Palestine was inhabited by Palestinian Arabs. In 1850 these consisted of approximately 400,000 Muslims, 75,000 Christians, and 25,000 Jews. For centuries these groups had lived in harmony: 80 percent Muslim, 15 percent Christian, 5 percent Jewish". (Weir, Retrieved on 22/05/2010 from: <a href="http://www.ifamericansknew.org/cur\_sit">http://www.ifamericansknew.org/cur\_sit</a>)

The episode of Netanyahu's gift to Obama is a warped use of information. Such misuse of information by politicians, critics and editors compels us to reexamine our reception of the American canon. There are several references in Mark Twain's literature that are

impartially critical of Jews but such episodes are seldom highlighted or canonized. Here is where our role as educators lies; we are invited to counter the hegemony of the American canon by restructuring it. Twain is one of the Major American writers that one cannot avoid including in any American canon. But we have to acquaint our students with what he says against and in favor of Arabs. The aim is, of course not to alienate Arab students from American literature, but to boost their appreciation by making it more appealing through fair presentations.

We do not know whether we should count on Twain's opinion which was highly impressionistic and aimed at mixing memory with humor. But even if we think that Twain was serious about his claims, the following excerpts deflate and debunk claims that examples from Twain's literature can be used to support Jewish claims. In his article "Concerning the Jews", Mark Twain cautioned the Sultan of Turkey of his time against the Zionist plots to occupy Palestine and take it from its indigenous people.

Speaking of concentration, Dr. Herzl has a clear insight into the value of that. Have you heard of his plan? He wishes to gather the Jews of the world together in Palestine, with a government of their own--under the suzerainty of the Sultan, I suppose. At the Convention of Berne, last year, there were delegates from everywhere, and the proposal was received with decided favour. I am not the Sultan, and I am not objecting; but if that concentration of the cunningest brains in the world were going to be made in a free country (bar Scotland), I think it would be politic to stop it. It will not be well to let that race find out its strength. If the horses knew theirs, we should not ride any more.

(Twain, retrieved on 12/3/2010 from: <a href="http://www.twainweb.net/filelist/jews.html">http://www.twainweb.net/filelist/jews.html</a>)

In *Tom Sawyer Abroad*, Twain was more explicit in his refusal to accept giving Palestine to the Jews. Again in his known humorist style and in a dialogue between Tom Sawyer, on the one hand and Huck and Jim on the other, Tom defines the crusade to Huck and Jim as the attempt

of Christians and Jews to take the Holy Land from the "paynim" (None Jews: Muslims).

- "A crusade is a war to recover the Holy Land from the paynim."
- "Which Holy Land?"
- "Why, the Holy Land--there ain't but one."
- "What do we want of it?"
- "Why, can't you understand? It's in the hands of the paynim, and it's our duty to take it away from them."
- "How did we come to let them git hold of it?"
- "We didn't come to let them git hold of it. They always had it."
- "Why, Tom, then it must belong to them, don't it?"
- "Why of course it does. Who said it didn't?" I studied over it, but couldn't seem to git at the right of it, no way.
- I says: "It's too many for me, Tom Sawyer. If I had a farm and it was mine, and another person wanted it, would it be right for him to--"
- "Oh, shucks! you don't know enough to come in when it rains, Huck Finn. It ain't a farm, it's entirely different. You see, it's like this. They own the land, just the mere land, and that's all they DO own; but it was our folks, our Jews and Christians, that made it holy, and so they haven't any business to be there defiling it. It's a shame, and we ought not to stand it a minute. We ought to march against them and take it away from them."
- "Why, it does seem to me it's the most mixed-up thing I ever see! Now, if I had a farm and another person--"
- "Don't I tell you it hasn't got anything to do with farming? Farming is business, just common low-down business: that's all it is, it's all you can say for it; but this is higher, this is religious, and totally different."

- "Religious to go and take the land away from people that owns it?"
- "Certainly; it's always been considered so."

### Jim he shook his head, and says

"Mars Tom, I reckon dey's a mistake about it somers--dey mos' sholy is. I's religious myself, en I knows plenty religious people, but I hain't run across none dat acts like dat."

## It made Tom hot, and he says

"Well, it's enough to make a body sick, such mullet-headed ignorance! If either of you'd read anything about history, you'd know that Richard Cur de Loon, and the Pope, and Godfrey de Bulleyn, and lots more of the most noble-hearted and pious people in the world, hacked and hammered at the paynims for more than two hundred years trying to take their land away from them, and swum neck-deep in blood the whole time--and yet here's a couple of sap-headed country yahoos out in the backwoods of Missouri setting themselves up to know more about the rights and wrongs of it than they did!"

### (Twain, 1982, 6-7)

A fair canon of American literature may include works of Mark Twain the likes of the above. Twain's "Concerning the Jews" and *Tom Sawyer Abroad* are rarely anthologized. It is not fair for our students to be left to be fed with biased information about American literature when it is possible for us to acquaint them with the two sides of the debate.

### **Moderate Voices**

There were moderate voices in 19<sup>th</sup> century American literature that were impartial in the undertaking of social and political issues. Among these were the American transcendentalists such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. They spoke against the war in Mexico and against slavery. Emerson advocated originality, self-reliance and simplicity urging American people to imitate and embrace nature since it connotes happiness equality and charm. Emerson, himself an ex-

minister, found the ministry and the religious institutions of his time both corrupt and corrupting. To be a good minister for Emerson was to leave the ministry. For Emerson, the East is a source of charm with which he identifies mystically. When references to the Orient or the Arabs are made, one sees some kind of reverence in the works of Emerson. In "Self Reliance", Emerson finds pieces of wisdom in the patriarchs of Islamic faith.

But that which a man is does always by necessity acquire, and what the man acquires is living property, which does not wait the beck of rulers, or mobs, or revolutions, or fire, or storm, or bankruptcies, but perpetually renews itself wherever the man breathes. "Thy lot or portion of life," said the Caliph Ali, "is seeking after thee; therefore be at rest from seeking after it." (1985: 510).

Walt Whitman and Henry David Thoreau and their mentor, Emerson, spoke fairly and squarely about brotherhood, peace, human compassion and love. They abhorred prejudice, war and the inexpedient American government. They were genuinely preoccupied with the importance of an American welfare and not with mastering and usurping other nations and countries.

### Conclusion

In constructing a canon that serves the needs and expectations of our Arab students who study American literature, we need to assess our performance in teaching American literature and the intended learning outcomes of the American literature courses. I do not think that the anthologies we put in the hands of our students serve their national aspiration nor do they help them to integrate in a world culture with the expected confidence and pride like students of other cultures. While we want our students to appreciate American literature, we feel obliged to acquaint them with what concerns them in American literature and alert them to the hegemony of canonizing it. In doing so, we like them to appreciate the ethnic mosaic of American literature and its themes.

Students need to know that alongside the optimistic voices of the 19<sup>th</sup> century writers there are some less optimistic ones that are now exuberantly humorous the likes of Mark Twain, now pessimistically idiosyncratic the likes of the two American giants of the American Renaissance, Nathanial Hawthorn and Herman Melville. They need to know that some of the 19<sup>th</sup> century American writers share condescending and xenophobic attitudes towards foreigners and, particularly the Orientals.

Students also need to know that there are some shameful parts in American history that cannot be overlooked such as the blight of the Native Americans and Afro-Americans and the Hiroshima catastrophe, and that these parts are usually obliterated either intentionally or unintentionally from the textbooks of the young generation and lapse in the memory of adults due to time factors.

In restructuring a fair American canon, we are invited to defy the hegemony of the Holocaust as a theme that has been dominating the minds of scholars, creative writers and students of literature during the last century. In doing so we are not, by any means, undermining the horror of the Holocaust, nor are we calling for ignoring it as a phenomenon that is both shocking and horrifying. Rather, we are asking for some acknowledgement of other similar genocides in our modern history that are being ignored even when they are treated in marvelous literary texts by Arab American writers in general. But how can we proceed in constructing our new canon?

Our endeavors to create a canon may not be separatist in nature; we do not aim at alienating our students from world culture and intimacy. We want our students to be participants in a world culture that is dominated by tolerance, peace, democracy, cooperation and mutual understanding. We like our students to be brought up on the values of accepting others without compromising their ideals or their national aspirations. Our endeavors are guided and illuminated by calls such as that of Henry Gates:

To reform core curricula, to account for the comparable eloquence of the African, the Asian, and the Middle Eastern traditions, is to begin to prepare our students for their roles as citizens of a world culture, educated through a truly human notion of "the humanities," rather than – as Bennett and Bloom would have it – as guardians at the last frontier outpost of white male Western culture, the keepers of the Master's Pieces. And of the black female is perhaps the ultimate challenge of producing a discourse of the critical other (1992:42)

The envisioned canon would include the works of the major American writers of the established canon after scrutinizing their works so that we offer to our students "both sides of the coin". If the canonized work is antagonistic to Arabs we need to explain to our students the reasons and the implications of such antagonism and invite them to research the consequences and the possible ways of responding to the unjustified allegations. The envisioned canon would also incorporate ethnic American writers who are not canonized in the new sweep of the mosaic of multiculturalism in America. Ethnicity is a marking characteristic of American culture, life and literature. For more than a century Americans opted for a melting pot that would integrate all immigrants from the different cultural backgrounds governed by one constitution and united by the American virtues of freedom, democracy and justice. Many of these immigrants resisted assimilation and continued to maintain their links with their native cultures and many others came to realize that the American dream of life, liberty and freedom was a hoax: Americans are able to establish peace among them and deny it for others. Towards the end of the 1970's Americans gave up their call for assimilation in favor of the mosaic of multiculturalism. It wouldn't hurt the mosaic of multiculturalism, if more colors are added to it; perhaps it makes it more attractive and more representative. Arab American writers need to be recognized and our knowledge of American literature needs to be reshaped accordingly. The call here is for an education that encourages Arab students to be "citizens of world culture" in which they become participants and beneficiaries.

Once a canon with the above features is established, it would be suitable for students of all cultures including the citizens of the United States. If Americans learn to be fair and if they are able to live together despite the cultural differences, why can not the whole world find peace in the same way and by adopting the same Jeffersonian concepts and ideals of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness?"

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