

## America in an Arab Mirror: Images of America in Arabic Travel Literature— An Anthology, 1895–1995

*Kamal Abdel-Malek (editor), New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000, 152 pp.*

How do Arab travelers view the US? Much has been written about how western travelers and scholars have seen and described the Orient, thereby not only creating an image but also transforming the reality of it. Looking at this anthology one is reminded of Said's book *Orientalism* and inspired to ask whether a similar process takes place in reverse. Not in terms of change but certainly in creating an image of the unfamiliar as the other simultaneously admired and rejected.

Kamal Abdel-Malek has collected and edited texts of twenty-seven Arab visitors to the United States. Some came as students, others as accomplished scholars or curious visitors. Each text is an excerpt of a longer text, usually a book, and all books were originally published in Arabic and have not been translated into English before. Also, as Abdel-Malek points out in his preface, the collection represents most of the travel literature he was able to locate in Arabic and is completed by a list of all Arabic sources. Thus, this collection allows the reader access to a genre of Arabic literature otherwise not available.

The travel accounts are organized in five sections and chronologically by year of publication within each section.

The first section is titled *America in the Eyes of a Nineteenth-Century Arab* and contains one account of an Arab traveler to the US published in 1895. The author presents the reader with a comparison of what Arabs and Americans find important and how these preferences are diametrically opposed in most cases.

In the second section Abdel-Malek has gathered a variety of accounts under the title *The Making of an Image: America as the Unchanged Other, America as the Seductive Female*. The most interesting piece of this section is probably that of Sayyid Qutb, who studied in the US between 1948 and 1950 and published his account under the title *The America I have seen*. Much of what he noted about the US in the first half of the 20th century, in my opinion, still holds true today. Qutb concludes: "All that requires mind power and muscle are where American genius shines, and all that requires spirit and emotion are where American naivete and primitiveness become apparent. ... All this does not mean that Americans are a nation devoid of virtue, or else, what would have enabled them to live? Rather, it means that America's virtues are the virtues of production and organization, and not those of human and social morals." (p. 26f.)

The other accounts of this second section reflect on the temptation posed to the male traveler by American women, their seductiveness and loose morals, as perceived by these Arab men. In some of the pieces adventures are offered to the men, but answered with better moral virtue and ultimately rejected. It seems as if nothing has changed between 1951, when Sayyid Qutb wrote about this aspect of American life, and 1991, when the latest of these accounts was published.

The third section, under the title *America: The Dream and the Reality, The American as an Example to Emulate*, gathers writers who between 1924 and 1988 wrote about their journey to the US, some of whom stayed longer to study and work. Here one finds diary-type essays, reflections on the glorious sides of America, such as technological progress and development, a sense of order and system in everything and individual freedom. As the title of the section suggests, these accounts alternate between praise and rejection, fascination and disappointment. It is at times painful to read about the self-hatred of some of the authors, or the rejection of their own culture, based on their admiration for American civilization.

The fourth section, *America in the Eyes of Arab Women Travelers*, offers a unique insight into the experiences of Arab women traveling to the US. Their accounts are special because they reflect upon the observation of details of American life from a different perspective. Interestingly enough, unlike the men, women seem not to be subjected to the temptation experience. Their accounts are at times really witty and do not show a similar self-rejection, but rather a healthy pride in being Arab.

The fifth and last section offers *Satirical Views of America*. These pieces reflect at best the ability of Arab writers to express criticism in a more indirect and humorous way. The last of these texts was in fact written by the editor of the anthology himself.

Each text is prefaced by information about the author, his national and professional background, and introduces the book the piece is taken from. In acknowledgement of the importance of visual impression, this introduction also contains a description of the book's cover. It would be interesting to study this creation of visual images of America in Arab literature further.

An American reader of the book may find many things offending, others very entertaining. In any case it will help him realize how it must feel to non-westerners to be studied and described in such ways, as western social science has done for the longest time. The reviewer (herself European) could not help but admit the amusement she felt while reading these accounts, sometimes because the observations are so similar to her own ones as a visitor to the US, at other times because as a traveler to the Middle East she could see these travel accounts framed by aspects of Middle Eastern or Arab-Islamic civilization.

As a whole the anthology is an insightful collection of Arabic texts of this genre and provides a fascinating insight into Arab-American relations from the Arab perspective. It is striking to note that twenty-one of the twenty-seven texts are written by Egyptian travelers. It is not clear if Egyptians travel more than other Arabs, or write more about traveling, or if these texts were just more readily available to the editor. Also, it should be noted that a number of the writers are familiar, as they are well-known men of letters or scholars. Names such as Sayyid Qutb, Yusuf Idris, Mahmud Taymur, Philip K.Hitti and Hisham Sharabi are examples.

Some of the translations (done by Abdel-Malek and a group of his students) are better to read than others. Sometimes one wonders why the editor decided to present very short pieces while others are lengthy excerpts from the original books. The introductions to the texts list other topics covered by the particular book and thus create curiosity, but also the feeling of being left with just an aspect of the picture. This might be a good start to make more of these books accessible to English-speaking readers.

The index is a helpful tool if one is looking for reflections on a particular topic regarding the American image in the Arab mirrors presented here.

The reviewer would have suggested providing an longer introduction, discussing some of the issues touched upon in the collection of travel accounts. Abdel-Malek could have offered more insight into his motifs for compiling such an anthology and his own views on the question he poses in his preface: "...whether Arab writing on America could be regarded as a case of Occidentalism, a counter-Orientalism of sorts." (p. ix) He leaves it to the reader to decide after reading this anthology.

The book can be recommended to scholars interested in questions of mutual images of Orient and Occident, Arabic contemporary literature and Arab-American encounters. For others it is an entertaining outlook on how others see America. It can help Americans to temporarily look at themselves from an outsider's perspective. Those who are from outside of the US will find many of their own observations and experiences in this book.

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