

Aspects of Multiculturalism in the Poetry of Elmaz

Abinader and Maya Angelou

Prof. Dr. Ahmad Mohammad Abd Al-salam Ahmad*

ama32@fayoum.edu.eg

Abstract:

Multiculturalism is frequently used to denote a society with multiple and diverse cultures that co-exist within this society. As claimed by Stuart Hall, the “multicultural question” is concerned with “how we are to envisage the futures of those many different societies now composed of peoples from very different backgrounds, cultures, contexts, experiences and positions in the ranking order of the world; societies where difference refuses to disappear” (Hall, 2000: 209). The American society is a typical example of such type of multicultural societies where minorities from different origins suffer oppression and inequality. Here lies the importance of the multicultural literature to express the sufferings and dreams of these minorities as represented, for example, through the poetry of Maya Angelou and Elmaz Abinader; two poets from different cultural origins but they belong to the minorities in the American society. Thus, this paper attempts to show how the poetry of these two poets is a collective process of recognition and exposure of colonialism that denies and represses the identity of the minorities and how they achieve the restoration and reconstruction of

* Professor of English Language and Literature, Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Arts, Fayoum University.

(Aspects of Multiculturalism.....) prof.Dr.Ahmad Abd Al-salam

cultural identity in terms of political and literary contexts. Both writers represent a different experience as Angelou represents suffering of Black Americans while Abinader depicts feelings of hatred and racism practiced against Arab immigrants due to the belief that Arabs, especially Muslims, have terrorism tendencies. Though they depict different experiences, the poems of both writers can be described as a sincere call for equality and castigation of all forms of discrimination.

Keywords: Multiculturalism, Maya Angelou, Elmaz Abinader, discrimination, segregation, terrorism.

Multiculturalism refers to “the view that cultures, races, and ethnicities, particularly those of minority groups, deserve special acknowledgment of their differences within a dominant political culture” (Eagan). In the same context, Bhikhu Parekh defines Multiculturalism as “a term that is mainly about cultural diversity or culturally embedded differences” (3). Thus, multiculturalism is frequently used to denote a society with multiple and diverse cultures that co-exist within this society. It is much apparent to have its roots in nation-states. These states are the best examples of multicultural societies. Therefore, multiculturalism attempts to promote and guarantee universal rights for freedom and autonomy for all citizens in such societies with diverse cultures.

More recently, this diversity of cultures is stressed by Edward Said in his *Reflections on Exile*. He declares that “no

country on earth is made up of homogenous natives; each has its immigrants, its internal ‘Others’, and each society, very much like the world we live in, is a hybrid” (396). In his essay “Conclusion: The Multicultural Question”, Stuart Hall refers to Multiculturalism as ‘strategies and policies adopted to govern or manage the problems of diversity and multiplicity which multi-cultural societies throw up’ (Hall 209). He suggests that every ‘multicultural question’ attempts to consider ‘how we are to envisage the futures of those many different societies now composed of peoples from very different backgrounds, cultures, contexts, experiences and positions in the ranking order of the world; societies where difference refuses to disappear’ (Hall 209). Sandra Ponzanese poses a similar standpoint of Multiculturalism. She admits that

Multiculturalism as a concept always intersects with the politics of inclusion and exclusion of multiple cultural forms within nation-states. Multiculturalism keeps reminding us of both the local and the global by introducing minority perspectives while accounting for diasporic networks as well. (92)

Hence, it is the role of multicultural literature to be the “major source of insight into the rich cultural dynamics” of a society with a multiplicity of cultures (Ferris 5). It attempts to “build bridges of understanding over which all of us can cross into each other’s worlds” (5). In fact, Multiculturalism has gained much importance as a theory addressing different

issues of multiethnic postcolonial societies. Bhuban Chandra Talukdar states that “it has established itself as a theory in literary and cultural discourses related to the discussions and understanding of the multiethnic postcolonial societies” (146). According to Berthoud and Smith, “ethnicity is a multi-faceted phenomenon, based on physical appearance, subjective identification, cultural and religious affiliation, stereotyping, and social exclusion” (33). Bulmer, also, remarks that “Definitions of what constitutes an ethnic group or ethnic minority are subject to much discussion” (7). An ethnic group is a collectivity within a larger population having real or putative common ancestry, memories of a shared past, and a cultural focus upon one or more symbolic elements which define the group’s identity, such as kinship, religion, language, shared territory, nationality or physical appearance. Members of an ethnic group are conscious of belonging to an ethnic group. (7)

Hence, Ethnicity refers to a group or a community of people who either regard themselves as different and distinct from other groups and communities, or are perceived and treated as different and distinct and even alien by the society in which they live. So, it is either they who single themselves out willingly for reasons related to glorification of race and having past roots, or as a way of self-defense against a society that alienates them. In both cases, ethnicity is an obstacle that hinders social and cultural integration.

In fact, there is much interaction between ethnicity and Post-Colonialism, on the one hand, and Multiculturalism on

the other. Whereas multiculturalism deals with theories of difference, post-colonialism is concerned with historic legacies in a retroactive way (Ahmed 1346).

Multiculturalism entails management of contemporary geo-political diversity. The United States is a perfect example of a society characterized by multiculturalism (Linz, Juan & Alfred, 15). The country boasts of people of different origins who have made it their home. However, to judge the literary works of the minority groups, all is not well. Will Kymlicka's liberal theory of multiculturalism holds that culture is extremely important to an individual because cultural membership facilitates individual autonomy. For autonomy to be possible, a sufficient range of choices must be available. Moreover, culture is tremendously vital to an individual because cultural belonging facilitates self-identity, thus permitting confident belonging.

In addition, this theory argues that, considering that minority groups are underprivileged with regard to access to own cultures, they are eligible for certain exceptional protections. If inequality relating to access to cultural membership derives from luck and if an individual incurs disadvantages therefrom, minority groups may validly demand for majority groups to contribute in meeting the costs of accommodation. The theory further contends that, considering that states are unable to be neutral with regard to culture, antidiscrimination laws do not treat minority groups as equals. For instance, within culturally diverse communities, states find it inevitable to establish a single

language for public services such as public schooling. In his *Multicultural Citizenship*, Kymlicka admits that “one source of cultural diversity is the coexistence within a given state of more than one nation, where ‘nation’ means a historical community...occupying a given territory or homeland, sharing a distinct language and culture” (11). Given that the majority cultural group enjoys advantages in politics, the workplace, and schools, such linguistic favoritism brings about political and economic advantages.

Similarly, states could impose impediments on certain cultural groups in such matters as dress code regulations within workplaces or public schools. Such state dress code regulations burden religious individuals, an issue that necessitates help and support for such minorities to cope with such burdens. This theory additionally holds that, given that the minority status of national minorities and indigenous peoples is involuntary, these minority groups deserve self-government rights. Conversely, immigrants deserve polyethnic rights entailing fair terms of incorporation into the wider society by being granted certain accommodations and exemptions. As immigrants chose to migrate voluntarily, they surrendered access to their native cultures; they can neither agitate for collective self-determination rights nor refuse to integrate into the majority culture (Kymlicka 2004). The minority population is protesting the suffering meted on them that can only be compared to the colonial times. The post-colonial period, therefore, reflects a more accommodating population. Accordingly, the post-colonial

theory offers a powerful approach to ethnic literature of the United States and other regions in which the United States has immense political and cultural influence.

In the 16th century, the world experienced the phenomenon known as colonialism, which refers to the European settlement and political control over certain regions of the world (Kohn, 2006). Post-colonialism refers to the study of the era after the American and European decolonization that occurred in the mid-20th century and the accompanying political, social and economic consequences of the colonization process. Further, there is also psychological effects, which have transformed the literary work during that era. As earlier noted, that era is marked with cases of cultural exclusion and division that is threatening to cause major fallout between those who were colonized and the colonizers.

The theory has been used as a powerful lens in the analysis of diverse literatures. It provides the platform on which contributors engage, drawing various texts together in shaping their themes towards the perceived tensions that the U.S as a colonial power created. Hard questions often arise when there is an attempt to study the post-contact American Arabic literature and not just as a one voice among many in a multicultural society of the United States, but rather as an indigenous work of art that is produced and consumed in a global context of historical and ongoing colonialisms. This paper is intended to compare and analyze Maya Angelou's and Elmaz Abinader's literary works of poetry relating them

to a wider context of multiculturalism. It, also, attempts to show how their works are a collective process of recognition and exposure of colonialism that denies and represses identity and how they achieve the restoration and reconstruction of cultural identity in terms of political and literary contexts.

The history of oppression in America spreads to approximately three decades (Turner et al. 5). The level of discrimination and exploitation that families of the current generations went through is dehumanizing and traumatic. Through her poetry, Maya Angelou lays bare the oppression that African Americans have been subjected to for a long time (Smitherman 2). In a way, she pays tribute to the African Americans for being able to endure all the suffering brought about by racism, discrimination and slavery. During that time, ethnic oppression was rife and those who were perceived not to be American were sidelined and discriminated against. While instances of ethnic oppression have subsided, the truth is that they still exist. This is evident through recent rampant shooting of the blacks and no one seemed to care. Other than ethnic oppression, another form of oppression that appears to be growing by the day is religious profiling. Unlike Angelou who was subjected to ethnic profiling, Abinader was subjected to religious profiling. The manner has been worsened by the belief that all Muslims have terrorism tendencies. With this impression, most people see no problem whenever Muslims are discriminated against. The western media that tend to blame

Muslims for any terrorist activity have fanned this perception and so most Americans see any person from the Arab country as a terrorist. Such postcolonial multiculturalism can clearly be detected in the poetry of Maya Angelou and Elmaz Abinader.

Maya Angelou, previously known as Marguerite Ann Johnson, was born in 1928 at St. Louis, Missouri to Baily Johnson and Vivian Baxter (Chidi 55). The name Maya originated from her overprotective elder brother who used to refer to her as Maya Sister. The name later transformed to Maya meaning "mine." Angelou had a very difficult life as she grew up together with her siblings. Their life was characterized by constant movements, and hence did not get time to stay at one place and acclimatize. This constant motion was orchestrated by the divorce of her parents, which meant that they had to keep shifting from one parent to the other and in some cases to their grandparents. Despite these challenges, Angelou had a passion in reading and so read ravenously and wrote poetry at the same time. She loved reading the works of William Shakespeare, Edgar Allan Poe and Rudyard Kipling as well as the devoted writers of the Harlem Renaissance such as Langston Hughes, Paul Laurence and W.E.B Dubois among others.

Elmaz Abinader, on the other hand, is one of the multifaceted talented Arab American writers today. She is an award-winning artist of Lebanese origin and an educator. Her creativity can be evident through her poetry and academic qualifications. She studied in Columbia University where she

got her masters of fine arts in poetry and a doctorate in creative writing. Her post-doctoral fellowship in humanities led to the development of her first major published literary work entitled *Children of the Roojme*, and *A Family Journey From Lebanon*. In this journey, Toni Morrison, a Nobel literature laureate was her advisor. Her poetry collection *In the Country of My Dreams* won the 2000 PEN Award for literature. Most recently, Abinader performed *Country of Origin* at the Kennedy Center and has received invitations to various countries. The plays to be performed were *Country of Origin*, *32 Mohammeds* and *Ramadan Moon*.

In their literary works, the two poets give different experiences of the oppression they face in the post-colonial period. Looking at the histories of the two authors, it is apparent that their history plays a significant role in determining the path of their poetry. The themes highlighted in their works draw heavily on their individual experiences. Through these themes, the reader recognizes the environment of the United States at that time and reflects on—how the authors treated the changes in environment during this post-colonial era. Through these themes, similarities and differences between the two authors can be detected.

Angelou has written a number of literary works such as plays, poetry, and juvenile literature and in all these works, racism, courage and hope lie in the core of her major themes (Birhan 7). As a child, Angelou experienced racism as she used to live under racist Jim Crow laws. During that time, she experienced crippling segregation that demanded

for the courage to overcome the pressure. In, *I know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, she puts down a number of several painful childhood memories on racism (Angelou, par 2). She applies the theme of racism through memory devices in both her poetry and prose. For instance, in the poem, “The Calling of Names”, she uses the names that were used to refer to African-Americans for a long time such as “nigger,” “negro,” “colored,” and “black”:

He went to being called a Colored man
 after answering to “hey nigger,”
 Now that’s a big jump,
 anyway you figger,
 Hey, Baby, Watch my smoke.
 From colored man to negro
 With the N in caps,
 was like saying Japanese
 instead of saying Japs.
 I mean, during the war. (Angelou 46)

She then goes on to examine the effect of each of the names on the psyche of the African-American subjects. While the poem identifies some of these names as being woefully derogatory, it suggests that the move from the use of the term “colored man” to “negro” provides a sense of pride in the classier sounding of the term, “Negro.” This experience by Angelou is an indication of the repressive attitudes that the natives had towards non-natives and especially the blacks

that led to the experiences of cultural exclusion. In this case, the Blackman did not understand why someone else is naming him.

The monumental poem of Angelou, “And Still I Rise” written in 1978 appears to be an appeal for harmony, community and an aspect of civilization across the racial divide. Despite all the negative references and connotations made on the black Americans, the persona still says, “like dust, I rise”:

You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I’ll rise (Angelou 163)

In the majority of her works, Angelou uses “I” as a collective term to signify “us”. Angelou’s *And Still I Rise*, in fact, comes across as rallying the black Americans who are experiencing racism in the United States to have courage. Angelou lays more emphasis on courage and tells her fellow Black Americans that courage is all that they need. She is not afraid to express her resentment towards oppression stressing, at the same time, her individuality:

Does my sassiness upset you?
Why are you beset with gloom?
‘Cause I walk like I’ve got oil wells
Pumping in my living room. (163)

She goes ahead to call for the people to demand back their ideas, dreams and identities that they surrendered to the “leaders.” She continues to call on the black Americans to rise and confront the reality. While the country was free of colonialism, the segregation due to racism being practiced on them was a reincarnation of colonization. She refers to herself as the “hope of the slave” to give hope to all who are oppressed in any section of society.

Similarly, Elmaz Abinader, in her poetry, speaks about the segregation that is rampant on earth. For instance, in her poem “This House, My Bones” Abinader talks about war and exile. Being an Arab, she represents the Arabs as a minority group who are constantly facing war and exile. The political instability in the Arabic world means that the countries are always fighting forcing some to flee the country and go to exile.

Enter the house,
Sit at the table covered in gold
A cloth, Sitt embroidered
For the third child’s birth.

...

Someone asks, what should we do
While we wait for the bombs, promised
And prepared? How can we ready ourselves?
Do we gather our jewelry and books,
And bury them in the ground? Do we dig
Escape tunnels in case our village is invaded?
Do we send our children across the border

To live in refugee camps remembering us
 Only in dreams, ghostly voices calling their names?
 What do we pack? The coffee urn father
 Brought from Turkey? The pair of earrings
 Specially chosen for the wedding day?
 How can we ever pack anything if not everything?
 (Charara7)

Beauty and pain are interwoven in images depicting those who have to face war and exile. They are tormented and filled with frustration. She takes us into the core of things to realize the amount of oppression they have.

She presents the same idea in her collection of poetry, *In the Country of My Dreams*, where she tries to redeem the achievements of a century that has been struggling with issues of tolerance and inclusion. This book of poetry was awarded the PEN Oakland Josphine Miles literary award for Multicultural poetry in 2000. She probes into concerns of a world of dreams rather than the real world to plant hope and optimism in the eyes of those who suffer such turmoil. In some of her poems, “Abinader aligns herself with the passions of Khalil Gibran, whose immigration to the United States left him in a world of dreams” (Lockard par 6). The dreams of Abinader are “those of a cultural Utopianism” . However, Abinader bitterly voices her political beliefs attacking, meanwhile, the U.S. wars in the Middle East. In the title poem, she writes:
 ... a fire burns

in the country of my dreams, wicked and consuming,
flying from the hands of soldiers, from the mouths
of children who have been raised by war. Smoldering
on the lips of mothers...

...in the country
of my dreams, no one plots invasions with
armies of soldiers. From the edge
of the sea, it's our poets who set sail... (9)

Abinader juxtaposes images of Lebanon. She talks about memories of immigrants of a land where, “apricots are as big/as oranges and as bright as the sun.” This shows the love and hope that the immigrants had in their country of refuge in which, unfortunately, life was a far cry from what they had expected. However, Abinader yearns for cultural consistency and a cosmopolitan world.

In the title poem of her anthology called *Sixty Minutes*, she speaks to a person watching a scary scene from Lebanon TV. In this anthology, Abinader shows how the face of an Arab American is smeared by a number of scenes portrayed on TV (VanDuinkerken & William 86). For example, she talks about the “suicide” stories from the Middle East, which the media tends to focus on extensively. This leads to more distortion of the Arab image. The poet notes that there is usually absence of neutrality from the media while covering bombings as they tend to display photos of Israeli victims whereas there are a number of Palestinians who are killed for no reason and no one notices.

Abinader rejects violence in the form of an anti-Arab stereotype and distorted images in the western media. She writes:

...You have forgotten
my small hands can grip nothing bigger than a pen
or a needle, that my eyes wander; they do not focus and aim.
But remember that I am an Arab, too, looking for a home
of my own, unoccupied, without siege. I need my fires quiet... (19)

According to Abinader, the rate of killing of Palestinians versus Israelis is often three or four Palestinians to one Israeli. Elmaz Abinader focuses on creating unity between the Islamic and Christian cultures by emphasizing values of equality, compassion, and respect for the earth (VanDuinkerken & William 88). In *Culture and Resistance: Conversations with Edward W. Said*, Edward Said suggests that “in almost every news report on almost every day from the West Bank and Gaza, if you look carefully at the end you will see that four, five, six Palestinians were killed. They are nameless. Killed for no particular reason. Lots of children have been killed. The rate of killing of Palestinians vs. Israelis is three, sometimes four, to one” (*Culture and Resistance* 134).

She utilizes her insights and experiences to come up with a presentation, which employs irony and anecdote to sensationalize the state of Arab-Americans. This presentation is pegged on some basic paradoxes of the Arab-American identity. In this case, the “Arab” is pitted against the

“American” within a person who must formulate a way of accepting both. Abinader is an American born in Pennsylvania. However, she reminds us with her Arab identity:

But remember I am an Arab, too, looking for a home of my own, unoccupied, without siege . . .

At night I watch the moon that passed across Lebanon before it came to this sky. The stars are your thousand watching the Hezbollah move in the dark. And their glitter is the name in my eyes that rises quickly and dies. (22)

She rejects the negative images of the Arabs claiming that an Arab American identity is like the “moon” that comes across Lebanon and America. The two sides within the individual strive for a simple meaning, which will never be achieved due to the political and cultural rivalries and the mythologies that separate them.

A case in which this aspect of duality comes about is in her play *Ramadan Moon* where Abinader narrates her detainment at the London airport for 8 hours where the guards believed that she had disguised herself as an American but in real sense was an Arab. Similarly, upon her arrival in Saudi Arabia, she was again detained with a reason that she did not appear American enough. This was because she lacked the relevant American features, such as having blond hair. Kim Jensen comments on this duality of identity. He says :

Throughout the play, Abinader makes the audience aware that there is an enormous gap between our perceptions of the Arab World and the actual lived experience. And she rails against the fact that Americans only seem to want to “learn” about Arabs when oil prices rise, or when there has been a bombing in Jerusalem, or in Oklahoma City...but in her voyage to the Arab World she also discovers the same lack of understanding about the Western experience. (34)

In the entire play, Abinader makes it clear to the audience that there is a huge gap between the general perceptions of the Arab world and the reality. A majority of people perceive Arabs to be bad but in reality, Arabs are very good people. They are normal human beings with feelings and so cannot participate knowingly in things that will hurt another person. Similarly, she refutes the belief that Americans only get interest in the Arabs when there is something to gain such as oil or when there occurs an attack. Americans will always stand up for what is not right and, unfortunately, they are labeled as opportunists who are just after the wealth of the country they purport to be helping. Therefore, Abinader, in her literary works has been quite evocative and informative and so readers even without any background in these issues are usually able to understand the prevailing issues.

Angelou's poem "Momma Welfare Roll" depicts identity as the main factor that is responsible for the plight of African Americans in the foreign land.

Her arms semaphore fat triangles,
Pudgy hands bunched on layered hips
Where bones idle under years of fatback
And lima beans. (Angelou)

The mother feels anguish and despair since she know well that her children cannot enjoy the kind of childhood that every child should have. She has a state of frustration and anger.

Her jowls shiver in accusation
Of crimes clichéd by
Repetition. Her children, strangers
To childhood's toys, play
Best the games of darkened doorways,
Rooftop tag, and know the slick feel of
Other people's property. (148)

This poem brings out the inability of African Americans to be proud of their identity and to pursue a life of dignity (Crawley et al, 2520). This theme of identity is directly linked to the major theme of racism in Angelou's poetry given that identity gives rise to racism that was apparent during the postcolonial period and is still seen even today. Both Angelou and Abinader face similar and unique post-

colonial experiences that come about due to the same issue of racism. However, Abinader takes on a different approach whereby she is enlightened about the prejudice harbored by the different groups and so each group is a victim of the other. While Angelou takes a firm stand against white Americans, Abinader tries to visualize both sides of the coin. She tries to see why the two sides hate each other to such an extent. For instance, in “Sixty Minutes”, as she is speaking to a viewer watching a tense scene on TV, she understands that the viewer has already developed a negative attitude towards her. For this reason, she tries to explain to him the stereotyping that takes place labeling her a source of terror.

Abinader already knows that the viewer is terrified by the pictures of Hezbollah and for this reason, keeps telling the viewer not to be afraid.

Don't be afraid of the picture
you see of the Hezbollah, faces wrapped
when they talk to the camera, so they won't
be recognized. Don't be afraid of the m-16's strapped (19)

The viewer's fear of the poet depicts the social prejudices that continue to exist in the postcolonial era and how people are conditioned to believe that all Arabs are terrorists (Rose, 4). The repeated pleas by the poet to tell the viewer not to be afraid reflect the deep rootedness of the belief about Arabs and that it will require a lot of effort to assure Americans and other non-Arabs to subscribe to the Western beliefs that

Arabs are indeed peace- loving people. However, the poet does not blame the viewer for the fear he exhibits. All that she blames is the media who are conducting negative advertisements about Arab countries. Arab countries have always been associated with political instability and war. This instability, as Michael Suleiman notes, is due to the stereotypes that have been developed about the Arab countries and that as long as Israel and Palestine continue with their conflicts, then the Zionist forces will use all means possible to ensure that the United States puts in place policies that regards any Arab group or movement to be a serious security threat.

Angelou and Abinader bring to the attention of the readers and the viewers a pathetic state in which the society judges the minority based on their skin color rather than on their human traits. The color black that is generally perceived to represent negative traits is taken to represent the character of the human beings and this is unjust and unfair. Ironically, those who perceive themselves to be white in color, symbolizing their purity, fail to display the characteristics they purported to have. These wrong perceptions are also evident at both the London and the Saudi Arabian airports where Abinader was held up for hours each believing that she was an enemy. This reveals the negative perception that not only the western society has about the Arabians, but also her fellow Arabs.

Edward said expresses his ideas about the distorted image of Islam in the Western Texts and how it is perceived as a threat and a danger to the West.

In an article entitled “Islam through Western Eyes” published in *The Nation* two years after *Orientalism*, Said emphasizes his ideas of the distorted image of Islam in the West’s texts and media, shedding more light on how Islam is seen as a threat of a return to the Middle Ages and a danger to the democratic order in the West. In this article, Said reasserts his point in *Orientalism* that the same mistake made by the past Orientalists is repeated now by blindly generalizing all the Muslims and by simply classifying them into good or bad Muslims. He wonders how the scientific progress and objective research in the West, mainly in the States, hasn’t included Orientalism, where Orientalists are still biased, but the reason, to him, is, after all, a political one. (Hamadi 39)

Hamadi contends that “Said’s theory of postcolonialism is mainly based on what he considers the false image of the Orient or the East” He claims that “according to Said, these have always shown the Orient as the primitive, uncivilized “other”, in an attempt to create it as the contrast to the advanced and civilized West.” The western society is

perceived as being superior and safe whereas an Arab is considered dangerous to an extent that not even fellow Arabs can trust their own. Ramon Grosfoguel refers to this notion of superiority in his “The Multiple Faces of Islamophobia “. He claims that superiority is attained “to support colonial expansion and bring Western Civilization even if it is bourgeois and brutal in order to overcome a “barbarian” state of affairs. The superiority of the “West over the rest” and, in particular, over Muslims is quite clear” (27). Thus, the identity of the Arabs is that of terrorism, while that of Westerners is that of saints. Just like the blacks, the lives of the Arabs in this case are depicted as valueless. This is because as Abinader notes, whenever war breaks out between Palestine and Israel, for example, the media only covers the lost lives of the Israelis and shifts all the blame to the Palestinians. No one seems to be concerned about the lives of Palestinians lost and no one takes time to investigate the real reason for war. All that people do is to castigate the Arabs due to the belief that they are on the wrong.

Abinader tries to explain her views on the factors that continue to fan this animosity. Unlike Angelou, who seems to vouch for the use of force or a revolution (Angelou, par 4), Abinader does not show any feelings of anger or resentment. She appears to understand and so does not castigate the Americans for perceiving the Arabs the way they do. Whereas Angelou advocates for retention of individual identities, Abinader vouches for assimilation. In the same breadth, Angelou also fights off discrimination. She was

specifically concerned with discrimination of black women. In this case, she protests the perception of black women not fit for employment opportunities and that they were only fit for low wages, unskilled jobs at the time. This notion of discrimination applied even to black men. Men, too, were not accorded well- paying jobs and were only limited to unskilled jobs with a very small salary. At one point, Angelou claims, “They don’t give me welfare I take it.” This is an indication that not only women, but also the black American population were not catered for appropriately. Whenever they needed something, they would take it upon themselves to get it. This reflects the desperate state of one minor race against the majority in the American society:

The nation was divided by segregation—a formal policy in which Black people weren’t allowed to attend good schools, get high-paying jobs, live in valuable houses or receive proper medical treatment for their diseases. They weren’t even allowed to sit among white people on public buses, or drink from the same water sources, as they were considered to be unworthy of equality. (Birhan 47)

Blacks are segregated; they are culturally excluded since even in places of residence, there are certain places where blacks cannot go. They are confined in one locality where

they live like animals. These places are like a jungle where people kill each other and no one cares.

Angelou portrays the African American population as still being colonized by the white population. It is still difficult for a black person to land a decent job and even if he/she does, he/she has to fight off a number of challenges such as lack of confidence. The black person is like a caged bird that sings but cannot get out of the cage as Berhan suggests. . Angelou “reveals via her works, the caged bird sings of freedom bound by the cage of race, gender and class” (35). A caged bird yearns for freedom and so is the black person within the white society. Unlike Abinader, Angelou refuses to see anything positive with the whites. According to her, the feeling of supremacy by the whites serves as the medium through which hidden imperialist agendas are perpetuated. Abinader, on the other hand, tries to look at the issue of racism from the lens of the western society. She tries to understand that the negative perceptions that the whites have against the Arabs because of the negative publicity are created by few individuals who are strategically placed to benefit from any fallouts. Arabs, according to Abinader, perceive Americans to be opportunists who will take advantage of a circumstance in order to benefit. For instance, the Arabs believe that the western governments with stakes in oil have orchestrated the political unrest in their region. Therefore, in Abinader’s

view, it would be appropriate to assimilate for a peaceful coexistence.

In conclusion, ‘multiculturalism’, as Hall claims, denotes “strategies and policies adopted to govern or manage the problems of diversity and multiplicity” within multicultural societies (Hall, 2000: 209). From the experiences of the two authors, it is apparent that the experiences are of a similar nature irrespective of their original culture. While the authors present different approaches to handling imperialism, there is a need to formulate policies that will encourage a spirit of tolerance. The analysis has revealed that the rampant racism experienced by the minorities could purely be due to unsubstantiated claims and generalizations, which need to be denounced. Given that the United States prides itself as a country where people have the freedom of being who they are without persecution, it is high time they embraced multiculturalism. The recent slumbering of Muslims by politicians and other highly influential people only brings pictures of the colonial periods where oppression was the order of the day. People should be taught to be tolerant to each other irrespective of one’s ethnic or religious background. Maya Angelou suffered ethnic discrimination whereas Elmaz Abinader suffered from religious discrimination under the guise of fighting terrorism. All these forms of discrimination are the same and should be castigated by all means.

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