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**Multicultural Identity: A Critical
 Reading of Zaid Shlah's Poetry**
A B S T R A C T

The fundamental pivot of multicultural discourse is the poetics of identity. It entails the issue of otherness, which illustrates the prospect of cross-cultural intellectual exchange of different cultures. In order to change the image of Arabs, contemporary Arab-American poetry heavily draws on the poetics of exile, culture, identity, race, and gender misperception. The research examines the issue of identity which is skillfully represented in Zaid Shlah's poetic collections, *Taqsim* and *Clockwork*, via the prisms of intellectual plurality, cultural diversity, and the effects these have on individual and societal identities.

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الهوية متعددة الثقافات: قراءة نقدية في شعر زيد شلاح

أيوب إبراهيم عليوي / جامعة تكريت، قسم اللغة الإنجليزية

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الخلاصة:

تتمثل محورية الخطاب متعدد الثقافات في شعرية الهوية، والهوية تتناول قضية "الآخر"، التي تسلط الضوء على احتمالات التبادل الفكري العابر للثقافات المختلفة. ولتغيير الصورة النمطية عن العرب، يعتمد الشعر

العربي-الأمريكي المعاصر بشكل كبير على شعرية المنفى، والثقافة، والهوية، وسوء الفهم المرتبط بالعرق والجنس. يتناول هذا البحث قضية الهوية التي تمثلها ببراعة مجموعات زيد شلاح الشعرية، تقسيم و ساعة لزمن، من خلال عدسات التعدد الفكري، والتنوع الثقافي، وتأثيراتها على الهويات الفردية والمجتمعية. الكلمات المفتاحية: التعددية الثقافية، الهوية، زيد شلاح، وعاء السلطة (salad bowl)، الشعر العربي-الأمريكي.

Multicultural Reading For Zaid Shlah's Poetry

3.1 Diversity of culture and intellectual pluralism and its impact on identity.

The fundamental concept of multiculturalism discourse is the poetics of identity. It tackles the issue of Otherness, which puts the prospect of cross-cultural intellectual exchange of different culture. People's perceptions of themselves and the world around them are shaped by the multifaceted idea of identity. It is a comprehensive area of research that delves into certain topics like gender, ethnicity, religion, culture, and education that influence how people see and are seen. Stuart Hall, a cultural theorist, emphasizes that culture and history shape identity. It is not a "autonomous and self-sufficient" contained system as a whole but rather one formed in connection to the inhabited culture and the "significant other" who acts as a mediator of values, conventions, and symbols (Hall, 1996, p. 275).

Charles Taylor discusses hyphenated identity as a major challenge in multicultural society. It is a fluid kind of identification that refers to people of mixed ancestry or identities. It is placed inside the space of the hyphen and attempts to reconcile the subject's native culture with his or her host culture. Hyphenated identities are biological and cultural constructs that are identified via

dialogic interaction. Taylor thinks that dialogue is a crucial way of expression that aids in the attainment of real membership:

We define our identity always in dialogue with, sometimes in struggle against, the things our significant others want to see in us. Even after we outgrow some of these others, our parents for instance, and they disappear from our lives, the conversation with them continues within us as long as we live (Taylor, 1994, p. 33)

Taylor defines identity as a unique way of living that involves thinking about “who we are” and “where we are coming from” rather than emulating the lives of others. It is how we make meaning of our identities and react to the world around us via our experiences, preferences, ambitions, and views. People do not live and exercise in solitude. They communicate with people via language. Public conversation is required in multicultural societies to counter cultural hegemony, which ignores the potential of the “Other” culture. It is an essential aspect that can assist gain recognition, equal treatment, respect and true citizenship. Taylor claims that the need for recognition is a necessary in democratic societies, and he makes a link between identity and recognition, saying that “recognition” or “misrecognition” serves to define our identities, that is, “who we are and what kind of life we lead” (Taylor, 1994, p. 25). He believes that misrecognition is a sort of humiliation and oppression that may hurt individuals and diminish their sense of humanity.

In order to change the image of Arabs, contemporary Arab-American poetry heavily draws on the poetics of exile, culture, identity, race, and gender misperception (Aldory, 2021). The issue of identity is skillfully examined in Zaid Shlah’s collections *Taqsim* and *Clockwork* via the prisms of intellectual plurality,

cultural variety, and the effects these have on individual and societal identities. *Taqsim*, indicating “division” and “improvisation” in Arabic language, takes the discussion of identity by emphasizing the fragmentation and rebuilding of the self in a multicultural world. *Taqsim* is a term from Arabic that is often used in Middle Eastern music, especially in Persian, Turkish, and traditional Arabic music. It describes an instrumental improvisation that introduces or explores a certain musical mode, or *maqam*¹. It is often played alone. The term itself refers to “division” or “partition,” as the performer separates the piece into several parts or investigates various melodies within a *maqam*. Shlah’s book *Taqsim*, explores more deeply into how intellectual plurality and cultural variety impact on the development of identity. As a prominent concept in the book, the title itself alludes to a separation of identities. Shlah talks on how cultural differences often cause identities to become divided, but that this fragmentation may also lead to



understanding and reconciliation. Shlah embraces intellectual diversity as a method to understand the multifaceted nature of identity. He uses this diversity to construct

¹ Maqam In Iraq one of several complex musical scales, or forms, typically associated with a specific tone or mood.

an individual's identity by recognizing the many cultural, historical, and philosophical influences that mold a person.

The cover of the book *Taqsim* features an old man wearing traditional Middle Eastern clothes (sherwal), leaning slightly forward, suggesting age or weariness. The poet uses this image referring to the tradition of Turkish people (his grandmother's people) and it is profoundly evocative and link to the poet's heritage. Shlah says that

The reference to Turkey is because my great grandmother was born in Mardin, Turkey, which was part of a historically rich area called Tur Abdin long before modern Turkey became a state. It was a distinct region and culture till the effects of WWI. It was one of several cities populated by Arabs (of Syriac faith), Assyrians and Armenians. Then my grandmother and most of my family moved to Kirkuk and Baghdad where my parents were born (Z. Shlah, personal communication, September 20, 2024).

The man's traditional attire, which includes his headscarf and baggy, worn-out clothes, suggests a link also to Iraq's rural or elder generations and symbolizes the poet's origins. For someone who is living away from his own country, this is a particularly significant representation of his ancestry and identity. The man's hunched over position, due to weight or aging, represent the load of memory and history as well as the difficulties that people have encountered. This could also express the poet's thoughts over the struggles of his forefathers or his own country faced. The image's ageless beauty stems from its black-and-white format, which positions it as a symbol of lasting cultural history. It also make one feel nostalgic, grieve, or ask about the passing of time, themes that people with a diasporic identity often explore when they consider what has been lost or left behind. It acts

as a potent reminder of the poet's Iraqi ancestry, the rich cultural past of Iraq, and the difficulties of maintaining that legacy in a foreign cultural setting. Using such image, the poet examine how his Iraqi and Canadian identity connect, considering how his history influences his experiences, ideas, and poetry. Shlah also combines two generations in the cover of the book. The child refers to his childhood and the touch of the door referring to his belonging to his home (his country). The child besides the old man suggest the past and present of the poet.

In *Taqsim*, the poems often examine the ways in which these many intellectual and cultural factors affect an individual's sense of self. According to Shlah, identity is a dynamic concept that changes all the time due to the many intellectual and cultural influences that people come into contact with over their entire lives(Z. Shlah, personal communication, August 8, 2024). In his poem entitled "Afternoon's confession" includes images that reflect the variety of cultures and the poet's attempt to bring disparate ideas together. In an attempt to represent his understanding of many regions of the globe, he strives to mix Western and Eastern components. He uses his poetry as a tool to make the world know about his ancestors, he feels a proud of his heritage by mentioning the elements of Iraqi or Arabian country. He says:

I sat, Heidegger sat, my wife
leaving and left us, ensconced
comfortably, on the green
green lawn,
corpuscular, textiles from the Silk Road, mute
things of all kinds, Aramaic off the Arab ear, a

leaf in tiny fragments nests in the matter of eye,

but nothing moves, Pangea², nor the tides,(Shlah, 2006, p. 33,
lines 1-8)

The poet alludes to Heidegger in the poem in order to allude to the philosopher's multifaceted issues, especially his investigation of existence, being, and time. Martin Heidegger, a well-known German philosopher, is noted for his in-depth investigations into the essence of human life and the idea of "Being" in works like "Being and Time" (Phillips, 2003). Shlah incorporates a layer of philosophical contemplation, implying that the poem explores broader existential issues in addition to being a personal perspective. It asks the reader to think about issues related to identity, existence, and time passing. It displays the poet's interest in Western intellectual traditions in relation to and in opposition to his Eastern ancestry. This emphasizes the poet's multicultural identity and the synthesis of several scholarly traditions. Shlah uses his poetry to connect the Canadian readers with Arabian culture by language. According to Taylor, language plays a crucial role in helping marginalized groups become more well-known to the general public when their voices are heard by those in the social majority who fail to see their needs, opinions, or the significance of their presence as a part of the community's culture. Socially marginalized or underrepresented minority groups are given a voice via language and discourse. In his widest definition of language, Taylor states that "the genesis of the human mind is in this sense not monological, not something each person accomplishes on his or her own, but dialogical" meaning that the languages of human beings, the arts, and the deaf are all ways to do interaction with others. (Taylor, 1994, p. 32). Shlah, in the poem, utilizes language as a way for self-awareness and cultural praise, which parallels Charles Taylor's

² Pangea means earth.

ideas which is the politics of recognition. Taylor contends that lacking acknowledgment have negative effects, especially for excluded or minority groups, and that recognition is necessary for a person's identity and sense of self. In order to portray his varied background, Shlah blends together a variety of languages, cultural allusions, and philosophical concepts. Shlah argues that he is a person formed by several civilizations by fusing Arabic, English, and allusions to both Eastern and Western traditions. The process of combining languages and cultural aspects necessitates awareness of his own, hybrid identity.

“textiles from the Silk Road³,
mute things of all kinds,
Aramaic⁴ off the Arab ear,
a leaf in tiny fragments nests in the matter of eye”(Shlah, 2006, p.
33)

These lines reflect the knowledge of the poet of different parts of the world which is “silk Road” this road connect different parts of the world. The “Silk Road” was a historic way of trade routes that linked the East with the West and allowed people, ideas, and cultures to cross freely as well as products(Kong, 2022). Similar to how Shlah’s poetry reflects his personal experiences balancing his West and East identities, the “Silk Road” is a metaphor of the mingling of many civilizations. His writing often addresses the political, social, and historical ties that once connected different areas, much as the “Silk Road” did. These ties are between the Middle East and the West. Thus, his poetry can be seen as a contemporary reworking of the “Silk Road” trades, which promoted mixed cultures

³ Silk roud is connecting China and the Far East with the Middle East and Europe. east-west trade paths between Asia and Greece started to emerge. The trade facilitated by the Silk Road route benefited not only the Roman Empire but also the Kushan Empire, which dominated regions of modern-day northern India.

⁴ Aramaic language formerly used by the Aramaeans, an ancient Middle Eastern ethnic group.

via contact and trade. In the same line, Shlah described things that passes through this road like “Aromatic” language which is significant to populations such as the Assyrians, Chaldeans, and Syriac Christians, all of which have links to Iraq, notably around Kirkuk and Mardin. Even if it does so subtly, Shlah’s poetry recalls the spirit of antiquated language and cultural traditions like Aramaic because it examines the multidimensional of identity and the historical linkages between civilizations. The imagination of the poet when he says “but nothing moves, Pangea, nor the tides”, emphasize his knowledge of the history and geography of different culture. He does not move from his place and his poetry will connect between his different identities and eras as a bridge.

a shadow stalks the ebb of meniscus

in pastel gray, and all of the animals, cormorant

& crane, and migrant pink flamingo, a moose must

spray its musk, and reindeer elks the night,(Shlah, 2006, p. 33)

In these lines, The “shadow” stand for the legacy of one’s upbringing, culture, or past. Shadows are often used as a metaphor for anything that is partially absent but nonetheless has great power, much like how a diasporic identity is influenced by its cultural heritage or history. In poetry and prose, the word “shadow” used as potent metaphors with a wide range of symbolic meanings. It gives text more depth and complexity, whether it is used to convey a feeling of mystery and suspense, the transient nature of life, or the hidden sides of humanity. Authors employ the haunting beauty of shadows to produce literary works that profoundly connect with readers by carefully weighing their usage and effect. Shlah uses the word “Shadow” to focus on his hidden side. The shadow represents part of him and

cannot get out of him. It also reflects his other identity so people cannot see it without shed light on his poetry. Another use of symbolic words are the color “pastel gray” which represents a soft, mild, and quiet tone. It contains intricate cultural, psychological, and artistic symbolism and semantics (Smith, 2020). Pastel colors are often gentle and mellow, and the color gray is frequently associated with serenity, lack of clarity, or neutrality. The color combination “pastel gray” conjures up images of a serene, contemplative space that might be used for introspection or meditation (Roslan, Taharuddin, and Nazrin, 2022). It is a color of transition as well, moving from black to white and from brilliant to dark. Marquez (2022) in his article entitled “Understanding the Color Gray and Its Shades” says “If gray could be described in one word, it would be “neutral”. This color is neither hot nor cold, neither material nor spiritual”. The phrase “pastel gray” refers to a section or turning point in the poem when many ideas or feelings meld together without striking a clear contrast. This illustrates how the poet is thinking about how various experiences are tied to one another or how cultural identities are merged. Shlah’s poem is full of symbolism, especially when he uses animals to explore his two identities as a multicultural poet. Animals such as moose, reindeer, cranes, and flamingos represent migration, cultural displacement, survival, and connection to nature, expressing many facets of the human experience such as instinct, environment, and culture. These species also reflect time passing and natural cycles that are undisturbed by human worries. The migratory and territorial animals serve as parallels for Shlah’s personal experiences with migration and identity exploration across cultures. Shlah’s poetry has many thematic connections to Romantic poetry, in which writers like as Keats, Coleridge, and Wordsworth utilized nature to express identity and transcendence. Shlah, like the Romantics, ties the natural environment with one's inner identity. As M.H. Abrams (1971)

stated, the Romantics believed that nature mirrored the soul of the poet and allowed for an exploration of the inner self (pp. 50-51).

The poem addresses the link between place and memory, emphasizing how geographic regions influence memory. The “Taurus Mountains” and “Orcas at the bottom of the Arctic Sea” motifs symbolize Shlah’s dual origins and link his life in Canada to his Iraqi background. The Taurus Mountains serve as a powerful symbol of his family roots and cultural identity, connecting to the Euphrates and Tigris rivers, which are essential to Iraq’s heritage. This link represents a location that conveys both closeness and distance, serving as a link between Shlah’s past and present. On the other hand, the mention of the Arctic Sea and orcas add a dislocation and weightlessness contrast. The wide and freezing Arctic Sea perfectly captures the feeling of loneliness that may come with being a diaspora. Because they are migratory animals found in the Arctic, orcas represent both adaptability and a sense of being unanchored, which mirrors Shlah’s sentiments of being uprooted from his own region. Together, these contrasting pictures of the Taurus Mountains and the Arctic Sea underline the diversity of identity and the interaction of multiple geographical and cultural factors. The cold, flowing Arctic stretches contrast naturally with the anchored Taurus Mountains, reflecting the relationship between displacement and belonging that characterizes the multicultural experience. Each part represent part of him and at the end they form one whole structure. In this way, Shlah’s work encourages readers to consider the intricate dynamics of heritage, memory, and identity, emphasizing how migratory experiences and the harsh realities of living in a new nation impact one’s sense of self across geographic boundaries.

Shlah’s “Afternoon’s Confession” poem uses a fragmented and stream of consciousness form to depict the multiple layers of identity, memory, and history.

This non-linear structure allows for seamless transitions between personal introspection, cultural allusions, and philosophical thoughts, reflecting the poet's journey between his Iraqi origins and Canadian diasporic existence. The poem exemplifies Homi Bhabha's idea of "unhomely lives," in which the borders between home and the world blur, as historical and cultural references such as the Silk Road, Aramaic, and nature images are contrasted rather than progressing linearly. Bhabha states "the borders between home and the world become confused" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 9), which is noticeable in Shlah's travels between personal experience and broader cultural history. This structure is also meets Gilles Deleuze's concept of "temporal multiplicity," in which time exists in layers, enabling the past and present to interact. According to Deleuze (1989), "time is out of joint" for persons experiencing contemporary displacement (p. 271). In the poem, the Taurus Mountains represents the poet's ancestral history, while the Arctic Sea represents his new home in Canada, symbolizing the tension of emigration. On the other hand, the confessional tone defines by the title, suggests the writer's personal engagement with history and personal truth. Israt Jahan's argues that "Confessional poetry is quite different from traditional poems. This genre breaks down the traditional definition of poetry and explores new poetic style where poets vent out their inner feelings and unspoken words through their writings" (Jahan, 2015, p. 1). Shlah's art therefore reflects both personal and social issues with identity and relocation, use confession to depict the multifaceted connection between past and present.

Shlah's second book, *Clockwork*, explores the diversity of identity, especially in the contexts of cultural legacy and the contemporary world. The anthology intertwines personal history with wider cultural stories, illustrating how individual experiences and larger social influences create one's identity. Shlah often explores

into his cultural history, examining the impact of his Middle Eastern heritage on his sense of self. The engagement between his background and the Western society he lives in is a constant motif, implying a dual identity that is enhanced his cultural intersections. The poems regularly contrast contemporary living with traditional ideals, illustrating the poet's quest to balance these sometimes opposing elements of his personality.

His poem entitled "An Ant Climbs a Wall" the ant's repeated efforts to climb the wall serve as a metaphor for resiliency and the will to persevere in the face of hardship. The poem also addresses topics of cultural history and intellectual plurality, demonstrating how these factors create and confuse the poet's sense of self. It depicts the continual negotiation of one's identity in a multicultural environment, as well as the acceptance of complexity and ambiguity as part of the process. shlah's poem begins with allusions to Istanbul and the Ottoman Empire, implying a link to a rich, multifaceted past and culture. He says

Somewhere between

Istanbul and the Ottoman's

last breath

an ant legs its way up

an ancient, white wall.

At a certain protrusion

in the wall, the ant tumbles

to the ground

I have been watching

it climb now, only to fall,

for over three cups of tea. (Shlah, 2015, p. 21)

Istanbul, a city at the intersection of many civilizations, symbolizes the meeting point of Islam and Christianity as well as East and West. Korkut and Özyavuz (2016) in their research entitled “Reflections Of Cultural Diversity In Turkey Urban Parks And Green Areas: İstanbul, Tekirdağ, Kirklareli Examples” describe İstanbul as:

İstanbul is the city which has held the title of capital city for three great civilizations with a deep culture of love and tolerance. The city of dialogue where religions, languages, and races have lived side by side in the same streets in peace and harmony. İstanbul has been at the junction of great civilizations because of its geographic and strategic location and has hosted several beliefs and traditions of many people for ages (p.28).

From this perspective, the city stands out as a distinct civilization due to its rich past, internationally recognized historical items, establishments, customs, and culture. It is a city that has been the subject of multiple sieges, as well as being plundered and conquered. It became one of the centers of history, housing the capital cities of Rome, the Byzantines, and the Ottomans for over 16 centuries.

The expression of “the Ottoman’s last breath,” which symbolizes the fall of empire that mixed cultures, beliefs, and languages, empire once was a melting pot. Shlah compares the ant’s frequent falls to the difficulties of negotiating a multicultural identity in a complicated historical setting. The weight of the past pull you down every time. The phrase “Farther off to the left the fallen remains of Aphrodite, continue to decay in the garden” (Shlah, 2015, p. 21, lines 12-14) emphasizes this blend of cultural components, with Aphrodite serving as a symbol of ancient Greek culture and mythology. The ant’s perseverance against the wall serves as a metaphor for the ongoing fight to retain identity in the face of the overwhelming impact of many cultural histories. Shlah exemplifies intellectual

diversity by accepting multiple perspectives, as seen by his words “while the muezzin sounds late afternoon's prayer.” The juxtaposition of the muezzin’s call and the decaying statue of Aphrodite emphasizes the coexistence of opposing belief systems and ideals. The poet accepts numerous cultures without completely committing to any, proclaiming, “I am neither Muslim nor Christian,” indicating a shift away from strict cultural or religious identities and toward a more inclusive and flexible self-understanding.

The poem additionally presents a parallel between the ant’s attempts and human resilience toward forces beyond control, as portrayed in the ant’s “tiny hairs of resistance against an objective fate.” indicates a fight with predetermined or unpredictable events. It means that even tiny, apparently unimportant acts may demonstrate persistence and resistance in the face of greater forces or problems. The poet’s decision to leave the sugar in his tea unstirred “stikan” represents a calm acceptance to natural patterns, indicating an understanding of life's inescapable forces, whether cultural, historical, or natural. Shlah’s declaration “fully immersed in the faith of hot tea” criticizes conventional religious beliefs, moving the emphasis from institutionalized doctrines to personal, secular rituals. The act of sipping tea becomes a metaphor for dealing with life's uncertainties, valuing modest, daily pleasures above lofty philosophical solutions. According to Pinsky (2015), “in moments of futility, individuals often turn to mundane rituals as a way to find control or solace in a world that offers little reward for greater struggles” (p. 104). Thus, the poet’s faith in tea signifies an acceptance of life’s simplicity and the calm delights found in regularity, as well as a contemplative response to existential concerns.

During the 1960s, a number of geopolitical factors such as Arab-American disputes, Israel’s formation on disputed Palestinian territory, and US foreign policy

in the Middle East had a substantial impact on the Arab-American community and its literature. The Arab-American community became more politically aware and united as a result of these changes. According to Suleiman (1999),

By 1967, individuals from the third generation of the early Arab immigrants had begun to recognize their Arab identity and became aware of who they were. A portion of this third generation joined forces with politically astute immigrants to further the interests of their people in their former homelands as well as their ethnic group (pp. 10-11).

This time was an important turning point for many Arab-American authors, whose writings increasingly expressed political topics as Arabs were portrayed negatively in American culture. This transition prompted the establishment of literary groups such as “the Radius of Arab American Writers Inc.” (RAWI). Furthermore, the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, as well as the publication of works by other cultural minority writers such as African Americans, Jewish Americans, Asian Americans, and Chicano/a authors, provided spaces for immigrant and communities , involving Arab-Americans, to be heard (Majaj, as cited in Radwan, 2016, p. 41). According to Al Maleh (2009), Arab-Americans developed a unique cultural identity as a reaction to external obstacles. While they had formerly considered themselves as prospective assimilates, the focus of their identity gradually turned toward the Arab side. He states, “Arab-American writers were displaying solidarity with the community and with the Old Country. The Arab inside them was stirring more and more strongly” (p. 435).

Prominent poets of the Arab-American community during this period, including Lawrence Joseph in *Shouting at No One: Poetry* (1983), Sam Hazo in *Dying with the Wrong Name* (1980), Naomi Shihab Nye in *Different Ways to Pray: Poems*

(1980), and even Zaid Shlah's two collections, examined themes of hybridity, acculturation, and multiculturalism while maintaining their close ties to their Arab heritage. This generations that followed the Civil Rights Movement, especially those of the 1980s and 1990s, embraced their ethnic identities and cultural heritage and were more aware of cultural identification. As noted by Al Maleh (2009), these authors embraced their cultural heritage, showcasing their Arab culture and offering insightful introspection. This writing, which shied away from sentimentality, provided moving analyses of immigrant experiences while bridging the gap in Arab ideals between the younger and elder Arab-American generations. It also created an opportunity for Arab-American voices in American literature and offered critical observations on the Arab world. It was via "ending a far from self-imposed invisibility; they even found home and acceptance in ethnicity" (Al Maleh, 2009, p. 24). Additionally, Arab-American authors also add to the rich literary and social tapestry of American society. Majaj (2008), states "Write or be written: Define yourself or others will define you" (para. 7), emphasizing how vital it is for these authors to establish their identities.

Similarly, In poems like "Arabic Snow" and "Asking Iraq to Comply", its reflect a critical engagement with political realities and the struggle for cultural representation. Both poems illustrate the transformative power of literature in articulating the Arab-American experience, responding to external challenges while fostering a deeper connection to heritage. This aligns with Al Maleh's assertion that Arab-American writers increasingly embraced their cultural identity, showcasing solidarity with their community and heritage through poignant, politically charged narratives.

On one hand the poem, "Arabic Snow" offers a profound meditation on the multifaceted intersections of cultural diversity, intellectual pluralism, and the

impact these forces have on identity. The poem, rich with imagery that spans continents and eras, reflects the layered experience of a diasporic individual caught between the pull of heritage and the realities of a new homeland. Through a blend of Arabic and Canadian imagery, references to historical and cultural figures, and the oscillation between languages, Shlah portrays identity as fluid, shaped by both personal memory and the external world. Starting with the title of the poem which is paradoxical, reflects the poet engagement with his Arabic identity and the environment of Canada. In the first stanza, The poem opens with a delicate blending of Arabic and Canadian landscapes, capturing the speaker's sense of displacement and connection to both worlds. the poet describes the singer that related to his heritage by giving him the details of western people. He says:

He sings as if the girl

with black eyes, the distance between us

from the Arabic

into Canada, the Aurora

Borealis,

its snow

sounds lovely, this Arctic

ear, my ambassador waits for sound...(Shlah, 2006, p. 43)

The mention of the “girl with black eyes” evokes a traditional image from Arabic culture, symbolizing perhaps love, longing, or homeland. This distance between two different countries is connected by art, the immortality of arts can link between different parts of cultures in the same context. This is juxtaposed with the reference

to the “Aurora Borealis” and the “Arctic ear,” distinctly Canadian symbols. Also the image of “Aurora Borealis” symbolize the mosaic of Canadian society and aligns with Meister’s statement in his book (2021) entitled *The Racial Mosaic: A Pre-history of Canadian Multiculturalism* describing Canadian community as “mosaic had become one of the most popular metaphors used to describe Canada’s cultural diversity. Portraying this diversity as a positive attribute, akin to a beautiful, artistic display, the mosaic metaphor was an expression of a broader underlying body of thought that had developed during the interwar period”(introduction, para. 3). The tension between past and present, between one culture and another, is reflected in the speaker’s use of sound and music. The “ambassador” suggests a figure representing the speaker’s identity, waiting for sound to connect the two worlds. As in other migrant narratives, the “ambassador” role symbolizes a mediation between worlds, “waiting for sound” that can bridge the gap between cultural identities.

Familial imagery is constantly explored in postmodernist Arab-American poetry, which is written by poets who are more conscious than their predecessors to preserve the heritage of their home culture alive in the US. Thus, images of father, mother, grandfather and grandmother are entwined in their poetry to suggest their commitment to their roots, reflect their integration with the new culture. Family to Arab-Americans equals identity. It is the bond which connects them to the legacy and values of their old culture. Loyalty to family traditions reflects the poets’ sense of their Arab identity which is at conflict with their present consciousness as American citizens. Shlah (2006) write :

there is mother & father

at the window, the minuscule of ice

coats pane, tongues stick crystallite,

and Nathem al-Ghazali

wails a nebulas tune,(p. 43)

The image of mother and father standing by the window connects deeply to heritage and the migrant experience. The parents are depicted as being physically present in a cold environment, yet emotionally and culturally tied to a distant past. This image of them “at the window” can be seen as a metaphor for looking both at their current life in a new country and backward at their homeland. The window serves as a barrier, symbolizing the separation between their present reality and their cultural past. Shlah juxtaposes the wailing of “Nathem al-Ghazali”, an iconic Iraqi singer, with the cold, icy Canadian night. The “nebulas tune” of al-Ghazali evokes a deep sense of nostalgia and longing for the homeland, while the images of “a brown girl/ door opens to freezer night/ another beer chinks glass cold with ice chips” situate the speaker firmly in the present Canadian landscape. This oscillation between past and present, homeland and host land, reveal the intellectual pluralism inherent in the speaker’s experience. The “brown girl” represents a merging of cultures, a figure who navigates the space between her Arabic heritage and Canadian reality. Finally, Through the dance and feasting, the family not only celebrates but also preserves their heritage, making it a form of cultural survival. The lines “Aunts turn our Uncles/because the debkee insists/and feasting is best after laps rink the ice-skates” refer to this idea of adapting traditional practices like the “debkee” to a new context while maintaining their essence speaks to the broader theme of diversity in immigrant literature. The act of “Aunts turn our Uncles” reflects how this dance ritual brings the community together, both literally and metaphorically. In a cultural context, the “debkee”

serves as a collective celebration of heritage, performed in a new setting, signifying resilience and unity despite displacement. The line “the debkee insists” personifies the dance, suggesting that even in new circumstances, heritage continues to tie individuals to their roots. The dance becomes a metaphor for cultural survival and collective memory, passed down through generations.

On the other hand, The poem “Asking Iraq to Comply” is written before to the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, is a deep meditation on the cultural and historical importance of Iraq. The poem presents Iraq as the birthplace of some of the oldest human civilizations, faiths, and knowledge systems, and as a site of enormous cultural confluence. It also conveys profound sorrow for the destruction caused by contemporary war, especially in light of the American demand for Iraq’s “compliance”. In addition to being a potent criticism of the U.S.-led war, which he views as an effort to erase Iraq’s rich multicultural past under a cover of political conformity, Shlah’s art is imbued with pride in that legacy. Through the poem, historically, Iraq appears as a multicultural nation. Shlah guides the reader through Iraq’s contributions to human civilization, beginning with ancient societies including the Sumerians, Akkadians, Assyrians, Babylonians, and Persians. This diversity emphasizes Iraq’s status as a crossroads of cultures, languages, and customs where many civilizations developed and interacted. Hussein considers Iraq as “one of the most diverse countries in the world in terms of cultural and civilizational heritage. It is a country rich in cultural diversity, religiously and ethnically. The number of sects and religions coexist with each other in an area called Mesopotamia and the birthplace of ancient civilizations” (as cited in Abdulqadir, 2021, p. 73). As the center of human accomplishment, Iraq is described by Shlah as the origin of the world’s “first written language,” “first

poetry,” and “first pottery,” demonstrating the author’s pride in this multicultural past.

This focus on Iraq’s rich history is a reflection of the country’s multicultural scheme which does not attribute Iraq’s identity to any one culture or group. Rather, Iraq is shown as a country where many cultures and customs came together to create a common cultural fabric as different components in bowl each one has its privileges. Through this, Shlah asks the reader to see Iraq as a multifaceted, intricate civilization that has been created over thousands of years by intercultural interaction rather than as a single, cohesive entity. The poet’s commemoration of Iraq’s historical contributions to literature, science, and mathematics “al-jabr” serves as a reminder of the global dissemination of human accomplishments that began in Iraq.

Through the poem, the religious variety plays a significant role in defining Iraq’s multicultural character. The poet starts by referring to Iraq as “the birthplace of Abraham, of Ishmael and Isaac, of Arab and Jew, of Christian and Muslim.” He therefore draws attention to the relevance of Iraq to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the three main monotheistic faiths in the world. These religious practices are not only acknowledged as being in Iraqi history, but also as having coexisted peacefully for many years. The expression “together as Arabs,” which characterizes coexisting Muslims and Christians, refers to the lengthy history of religious syncretism in Iraq (Shlah, 2006).

Scholars such as Fred Donner (2010) have noted that early Islamic societies, particularly those in Iraq, were marked by a high degree of religious variety and tolerance. This was especially noticeable in Baghdad under the Abbasid Caliphate. The statement “Iraq is the first universities ‘madrassa’ of once glorious Baghdad”

supports this picture of harmonious coexistence (Shlah, 2006). Shlah focuses on the diversity of Iraq's religions, which span from the ancient Sumerian gods to the earliest Christian communities in the East, demonstrates that the country's multiculturalism was not only a product of geography but rather a fundamental aspect of its nature.

Despite this rich multicultural historical context, the poem is marked by a deep sense of grief for what has been lost as a consequence of modern violence, particularly the impending U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. The repeated mantra of "comply, comply, comply" is a hard criticism of the United States' demand for Iraq's political surrender in the face of sanctions and military threats (Shlah, 2006). Shlah draws a comparison between the historical achievements of Iraq and the destruction brought by modern warfare, where the antiquated irrigation systems that formerly supported civilizations have been replaced with explosives and "plutonium" (Shlah, 2006).

In this context, the demand to comply is more than just a ploy; it is a force that has the potential to destroy Iraq's historical and cultural identity. The poet grieves the disappearance of Iraq's rich cultural historical context, which included the intellectual legacy of Baghdad's scholars as well as the Marsh Arabs who previously flourished in the country's marshes. This loss of Iraq's heterogeneous identity is paralleled in academic debates throughout the effect of war and sanctions on cultural heritage. In addition to causing a humanitarian disaster, Makiya (2004) asserts that the invasion of Iraq and the ensuing warfare destroyed the nation's rich archeological and cultural monuments, wiping millennia of cultural memory.

In Shlah's poem, Iraq is portrayed as a victim of outside powers who want to use its rich, multicultural character as a political pawn, reflecting this tragic situation. He supports the view that Iraq's intellectual and cultural heritage is too significant to be destroyed in the sake of political expediency by drawing historical connections between the Abbasid Caliphate and the "first libraries" of Assurbanipal (Shlah, 2006). In addition, Shlah clearly takes great pleasure in his Iraqi ancestry throughout the whole poem. His comprehensive list of Iraq's cultural and historical achievements serves as both a scholarly account and a personal declaration of identity. The poet's use of family language gives his criticism of the conflict a very personal touch. He compares his father to the ancient Iraqi rulers who questioned their sons, "How long will it be necessary for us to continually guide you?" (Shlah, 2003). This close relationship implies that Shlah views Iraq's multicultural identity as a living component of his own legacy, one that he feels driven to preserve from the devastation of conflict rather than just a historical reality.

Thus, Shlah's opposition to the war is an act of cultural preservation as well as politics. He insists that before the United States and other outside forces can demand anything from Iraq, they must first "make amends" and refuse to accept the erasing of Iraq's multicultural character under the pretense of "compliance" (Shlah, 2006). This rejection of imperialism and war is consistent with postcolonial analyses of Western participation in the Middle East, where academics such as Edward Said (1978) have argued that Western powers often force their own objectives on the area without taking into account its rich cultural heritage.

The poems "Asking Iraq to Comply" and "Arabic Snow" examine memory, identity, and cultural legacies in the backdrop of political instability and migration. Shlah uses a variety of literary techniques, including: fragmentation, allusion, and

narrative style, to portray the realities of diasporic individuals and nations. In addition to enhancing these topics, his use of poetic devices, tone, language, and structure connects his work to critical viewpoints on historical memory and diasporic literature.

The diversity of identities and memories that are at the heart of Shlah's concerns are mirrored in the usage of free verse in both poems. The lack of a definite form in "Arabic Snow" allows transitions between the icy, isolated Canadian landscape and the warmth of family life in the Middle East. The speaker's memory of "There is mother & father / at the window, the minuscule of ice/coats pane" (Shlah, 2006, p. 43), which represents his dislocation between his past and present, demonstrates this fragmentation. Moreh (1968) stated that poets have greater flexibility to convey their ideas and emotions in unique rhythms using free verse. They may portray their poetic experience more effectively using free verse as it offers more flexibility than conventional poetry in terms of rhyme and meter selection. In "Asking Iraq to Comply," the free verse stretches out into lengthy, continuous lines that include historical allusions and connect the modern and ancient realities of Iraq. Free verse style, according to Said (1993), enables authors to create ongoing stories that defy colonial tyranny. Shlah's depiction of Iraq's lasting cultural relevance despite its war-torn present reflects this idea.

The tone in each poem complements its themes. The poem "Arabic Snow" expresses the speaker's yearning for a past feeling of place and cultural identity mainly via a nostalgic and introspective tone. The poem reflects the speaker's strong connection to the warmth and richness of Middle Eastern culture, which contrasts with the chilly, alienating experience of being in Canada, using striking imagery and nuanced language. The speaker emphasizes the difficult task of trying to preserve one's sense of cultural identity while navigating two very different

cultural worlds his Middle Eastern ancestry and Canadian realities. On the other hand, the tone of “Asking Iraq to Comply” is more sorrowful and angry. The poet repeatedly uses the word “comply” to criticize international demands on Iraq, expressing his anger in the process: “a decade ago the words: comply comply comply” (Shlah, 2006, p. 74).

In both poems, Shlah’s language combines historical and personal experiences. The speaker’s attempt to maintain cultural identity is seen in “Arabic Snow,” where he uses Arabic words like “sherwal” and makes allusions to Middle Eastern singers. The speaker in “Arabic Snow” tries to integrate his Middle Eastern origin with Canadian culture, which is reflected in Shlah’s usage of such ethnic identifiers. Whereas in “Asking Iraq to Comply,” Shlah uses formal, elevated, and clear language to emphasize Iraq’s historical accomplishments. Thus, Shlah’s discourse criticizes the demands made by international powers while still upholding Iraq’s dignity.

Additionally, Shlah uses several kinds of literary devices to support his ideas. In “Asking Iraq to Comply,” references to antiquated societies like Sumer, Akkad, and Babylon underline the historical relevance of Iraq: “Iraq is Assyrian, is Mede, is Persian, / is Babylonian, is the origins of human narrative, “ (Shlah, 2006, p. 74). Similar to this, the speaker’s fragmented identity in “Arabic Snow” is reflected in its fragmentation as he navigates recollections of the Middle East while residing in Canada. Finally, the phrase “comply comply comply” is repeated throughout “Asking Iraq to Comply,” poem underscoring the ridiculousness of the demands made of Iraq. Shlah’s repeated insistence reveals how these demands are degrading and how much they cost in human lives.

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