

Teaching Arabs, Writing Self: Memoirs of an Arab-American Woman

Evelyn Shakir

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Teaching Arabs, Writing Self traces Evelyn Shakir's evolution from a budding student of canon English literature who was desperately trying to "become white" to her epiphany that stories from her own working-class immigrant neighborhood might be of equal worth. There, she found her unique niche by becoming an author and scholar of Arab-American literature who helped gain recognition for this literature as a genre, and who helped readers see Arab Americans as people rather than stereotypes.

Shakir divides her memoirs into three sections. In the first, she reflects on her childhood during an era that frowned upon diversity. Like many immigrant children, she turns up her nose at the "wrong" foods: "Bread with pockets. Hummus and tabouli. 'Don't put that stuff in my lunch box,' I said" (p. 8). She even goes so far as to join a Methodist church whose quiet, orderly simplicity seems more "American" than her family's ritualistic but expressive Orthodox church. Acculturated to the "Protestant disdain for Eastern churches and, by extension, for the East itself," only later does she develop "[a]n inkling that there might be treasures I had turned my back on. That I might not always have to be ashamed" (p. 13).

In this section, we see the historical value of Shakir's work not only as a personal memoir, but also as an account of twentieth-century Americana. Born in 1938, she offers a rare narrative voice of that era – that of a Lebanese-American and a woman; a handful of personal photos literally offer a rare glimpse into the society of Arab-American women. Many of her childhood memories center on Boston's nearby Revere Beach, which boasted "slot machines spitting out weight, fortune, photos of Rita Hayworth," "Dodgems ('no head-on collisions' but we did)," and "clams in a Fryolator ... corn popping frantic in a display case ... frozen custard (banana my favorite) spiralling thick-tongued into waffle cones, then dipped headfirst in jimmies" (p. 32). Her true claim to Americanhood is that her uncle ran the beach's "glitzy" Cyclone roller coaster, which "gave me bragging rights among my friends and helped situate me closer to the American norm that was always just beyond my reach" (p. 29). The Cyclone was so important to the beach's identity that its closure in 1969 signaled the demise of the beach itself. "It's those cars that tell the story," she recollects. "As soon as masses of people could afford them, Revere lost its reason for being" (p. 43).

Shakir's self-perception also changes with the times. Originally uninterested in visiting her parents' village in Lebanon, she develops a willingness to explore her roots when "Black was beautiful, exotic was in, the melting pot was yesterday's thinking" (p. 14). While she does not dwell on it, these cultural origins movements would result in the establishment of minority studies in the university and the academic space for work such as hers.

In her youth, it was also by no means a given that Israel was there to stay. Through vignettes, Shakir expresses the anger felt by Arab Americans in a land where Harry Truman "waited all of 11 minutes before saying yes when Jews in Palestine declared themselves a state" (p. 4); their voicelessness when "comics on American TV gloated openly at Israel's victory" and "Arabs were mocked pitilessly" (p. 5); and their shame when, in the early seventies, "Palestinians are hijacking airlines and planting bombs" (p. 5).

However, the most dramatic social change that Shakir herself embodies is the change in social expectations for women. As a child she is embarrassed – feels less "American" – that her mother works, something her teacher says is "not proper for a married lady" (p. 8). It gets worse when her mother opens her own factory! Yet when she comes of age in 1946, it is her father who pushes her to attend university. On the beach, she watches swimsuit fashions dwindle from her mother's voluminous, black bathing costume to the bikinis of today. Like many immigrant children, Shakir is also under pressure to conform to the standards for women from her own ethnic community. During her youth she secretly dates, knowing her mother "could never forget ... the village culture in her bones, the dread of being shamed" (p. 23). However, she eventually moves out on her own and "takes up housekeeping" with a man who is not her husband. "Little doubt what the villagers would have said," she observes, "but it was a village my mother hadn't set foot in for seven decades" (p. 85). Shakir was also iconoclastic in living on her own as a woman in the Middle East – something that is still atypical and difficult today.

In the second section of her book – on her experiences while teaching abroad – the reflexive nature of her title *Teaching Arabs, Writing Self* becomes apparent. In Lebanon, Syria, and Bahrain she was teaching (as a teacher) and writing (as a writer). However, simultaneously, her Arab students were teaching her and her own self was being written about. Subject and object, teacher and student, intertwined.

Her decision to treat Arabs as an "other" in the title also reflects her belated recognition in Bahrain that "[t]hough we shared certain impulses and traditions, I was not Arab, I was American" (p. 83). Many second-generation immigrants will see themselves in that statement – visiting their ancestral

countries only to realize just how American they are and what it really means to be American.

It didn't matter finally that I was removed by just one generation from the Arab world, that my dark hair and eyes were Arab ... we ... were building, a culture of our own that was not Arab or not exclusively so ... we were fashioning our identity more deliberately and more self-consciously ... Mucking around in the past was the very badge of our American-ness. (pp. 83-84)

In Bahrain, Shakir also recognizes just how different Arab cultures are from each other. She went to Bahrain expecting her students to see Arab-American literature like she did; instead, they “de-familiarized” and “complicated it,” and “invariably enriched it” (p. 73). In retrospect, she realizes, “how silly I'd been to think that I, whose family had been in America for many decades, would read life in the same way as my Bahraini students.” Still, she is impressed that her students could “get outside their own skins” and say “This is how an American student would read this story; this is how I read it as an Arab or a Muslim; and here's the reason ... for the difference” (p. 82).

By sharing her student's views as well as her own, Shakir gifts the reader with a taste of Arab-American literature – not catalogued by name or title, but rather by meaning – for instance, in rebellious youth or the Muslim praying on a Navajo blanket. Here, however, I level my only real critique – I expected a specialist in Arab-American literature to know more about Islam. For instance she is unaware that, in one excerpt, the Islamic prayer is written incorrectly; her students are aghast. I was also taken aback by her skittishness and sense of the exotic at Ashura commemorations. I had to remind myself that, in her day, Middle Eastern studies as a university discipline had not yet been established. Today, a specialist in this field would be expected to take a core class on Islam. However, it was people like her who made that possible.

Many westerners who studied Arabic in Syria will see their own experiences there mirrored in Shakir's third trip in 2008, during which she visits the American language school in Damascus, the Roman ruins in Bosra, and – interestingly – a number of western expatriates as well as the flood of Iraqi refugees from Saddam's regime and the “war on terror.” She also conveys the sense of a foreigner seeking an experience in her refusal to rent a modern apartment or to shop at the modern grocery store. Shakir's portrait of Syria is, to me, deeply meaningful because, like Revere Beach, it no longer exists.

While she hints that all is not well – government surveillance, fear of discussing politics, a rigidly regulated university – she leaves Syria expressing her “affection for the Syrian people,” her “gratitude for the opportunity to live among them,” and her “lively desire to return to Damascus the beautiful” (p. 145) – not expecting that the country would soon be torn apart by civil war and that the Syrians themselves would be fleeing.

But this is her final trip for when she returns home she again has cancer, which then becomes another unexpected subject in her memoirs. During her first bout, Shakir shows how people can be “funny” (p. 154) – the callous doctor who gives her a clipped diagnosis, the GP who does not have time for her because he is running off with a woman, the impersonal oncologist who prescribes the wrong chemo pill, and the insensitive friend who dangles fancy bras in front of her after her mastectomy. Her story also reflects the tragic neglect of women’s health, from her mother’s time to her own. Although her otherwise healthy mother had a prominent lump, the doctor refused to test her for cancer until it was too late and the cancer had spread throughout her body. Shakir’s cancer also nearly goes undiagnosed since her doctor sends her to a hospital with outdated equipment. “Surely the staff – the doctors, the technicians – knew about the shortcomings of their radiology department. Surely, my GP ... also knew. Yet there they all were ... assuring me I was fine. Me and how many other women?” (p. 157). Ultimately, she would die from it two years after her return from Syria and her memoirs would be published posthumously.

When I opened *Teaching Arabs*, I expected to read about the search for identity and perhaps a travelogue. While I did find that, I also found much more; I did not expect to leave the book contemplating Revere Beach, social change, or cancer. As one would expect from a skilled creative writer, Shakir explores the complexities of race, gender, religion, and identity with subtlety, sensitivity, and nuance through prose without actually having to spell out those issues. While she clearly led a life that enriched others and left her mark on the world, however, I nonetheless felt that a sense of sadness and even loneliness permeated the book – from the loss of Revere Beach, to the loss of her mother, to the loss of her own youth and health. This, however, may have been yet another way for her to subtly address the human condition.

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