

Migrations: *Literary and Linguistic Aspects*

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Reading *Frankenstein* in the Light of the Immigration Crisis

Abstract: The chapter discusses similarities between Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Elke Sasse's documentaries *My Escape 1 & 2* in order to highlight the persistence of the fear of the other in the Western imaginary. The story of *Frankenstein* persists in our culture because it is the most powerful metaphor for our contemporary society unwilling to show compassion.

Keywords: *Frankenstein*, *My Escape*, confession, abject, the other

In 1816, Mary Shelley, her step-sister Claire Clairmont,¹ P. B. Shelley and Lord Byron went to Geneva as a part of the Grand Tour² and in order to get away from England where she and Percy faced ostracism, constant debt and the death of their prematurely born daughter. Their first trip to the continent happened two years before that, but it was in 1816 that they became migrants through Europe with the idea of finding a place to settle down and start a new life. Their travel narrative *History of a Six Weeks' Tour through a part of France, Switzerland, Germany, and Holland; with Letters Descriptive of a Sail Round the Lake of Geneva and of the Glaciers of Chamouni* was published only a year later. It was around Lake Geneva however, that they decided to take a break and see the landscapes that prompted the writing of *Julie ou La Nouvelle Héloïse* by the writer whom they all admired, Jean-Jacques Rousseau. It is a well-known story that Lord Byron initiated a ghost story competition, and each of the company had to write something. Byron composed *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, Canto III*, and *Manfred*; his doctor Polidori wrote *The Vampyre*; and Shelley composed two of his greatest poems, "Mont Blanc" and "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty." Mary was the slowest writer, and she could not think of anything while the two men pondered on the

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- 1 Claire Clairmont was Mary Shelley's stepmother's daughter from her first marriage. William Godwin married Mary Jane Clairmont and adopted her two children after Mary Wollstonecraft's unfortunate death, ten days after giving birth to Mary Shelley. Claire Clairmont was one of Lord Byron's lovers, and their child Ada was placed in a convent where she died at the age of 5.
 - 2 The Grand Tour was the tour of Europe undertaken by English aristocrats in order to inhale culture and atmosphere of the old continent. Italy was the usual destination for cultural sights while Switzerland was the place of the sublime natural sights.

heroic deed of Prometheus and his suffering as the template for the stories they were about to write.

As she said in the second Preface to the novel (October 15, 1831), she owed her “blank incapability of invention” to her youth, her gender and uncertainty about whether she could write at all. Growing up in awe of her illustrious father and feminist mother and now, having a poet husband, it was difficult for her to find her own place in that literary company. In the words of Gilbert and Gubar, she became a kind of Milton’s Eve trying to get rid of the influence of Milton’s patriarchy and docile submission to male myths.³ However, she wrote *Frankenstein*, the story about a scientist and his creation which is as vibrant now as it was two hundred years ago, and she excelled them all.

Two hundred years later, Europe has been facing the largest immigration crisis ever. Hundreds of thousands of people from Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Ethiopia, Eritrea and other countries have been fleeing to Europe in the hope of starting a new life. It is no longer a matter of fleeing the countries in which you would be ostracized and left at the margins of your own society; it is a matter of fleeing from the war and the inevitable death. The documentary series *My Escape (1&2)* by film director Elke Sasse⁴ has registered their routes from the Middle East and Africa to Germany, but also their life stories and the tragedies they had to face as human beings. A joint production by WDR and Deutsche Welle, the series won the Prix Europa in October 2016 as the biggest award for television, radio and online productions. The stories were recorded by the refugees themselves through their mobile phones, and these videos were edited and converted into films by Berlin producers. At first sight, the two events, the story of Frankenstein and the current immigration crisis, seem to have nothing in common. However, I want to propose several points of convergence. First, I want to suggest that both narratives use confession as the tool for authenticating human experience and to arouse compassion in a viewer/reader. Second, both narratives deal with the issues of “monstrosity” and “abjection” (Kristeva’s term) which were as vital in the early nineteenth century discourse as they are still relevant today.

In *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley chooses three different confession narratives. Walton, a passionate maritime explorer, confesses to his sister Margaret Saville

3 Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, “Horror’s Twin: Mary Shelley’s Monstrous Eve” in *Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 213–47.

4 Elke Sasse is a German film director who studied literature at the Free University of Berlin before becoming a journalist and engaging with longer documentaries. Her films always register people on the margins of our society from septic pipe cleaners to gangsters.

and explains why he gave up discovering the North Pole. Victor, the scientist who wants to push the boundaries of life further and therefore creates a monster, confesses to Walton and the monster confesses to Victor, his creator. Walton’s framing narrative serves as an insulation for the monstrosity of the story the reader is about to hear from Victor and it gives authenticity to both embedded narratives. Thus confession becomes an influential interpretive strategy, and it is a somewhat odd choice for a gothic novel. It places the novel in the Christian tradition, from St. Augustine to Rousseau, from religious to secular confession. Thus, Mary Shelley wanted to point out the veracity of the story about to be revealed, the truth of confession. In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault claims that “Western man has become a confessing animal.” Indeed, confession has become one of the main rituals for the production of truth:

For a long time, the individual was vouched for by the reference of others and the demonstration of his ties to the commonweal (family, allegiance, protection); then he was authenticated by the discourse of truth he was able or obliged to pronounce concerning himself. The truthful confession was inscribed at the heart of the procedures of individualization by power.⁵

Foucault continues that since the Middle Ages, torture has accompanied confession as it had to be driven from the hiding place in a person’s soul, or extracted from the body. In other words, confession has always been connected to the relations of power. When at the beginning of his *Confessions*, Rousseau claims to be speaking truth and nothing but the truth, promising to reveal a man who is entirely and truthfully himself, he is unaware of the fact that truth is thoroughly imbued with relations of power. Rousseau is writing his *Confessions* because, being condemned by the society, he wants to show that he is just like everybody else. Therefore, he is aware that the audience would be the final judge of his confession. In Foucault’s phrasing:

one does not confess without a presence of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console and reconcile (...) the agency of domination does not reside in the one who speaks (...) but in the one who listens and says nothing.⁶

5 Michel Foucault, “An Introduction” to the *History of Sexuality*. Volume 1 (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 58–9.

6 *Ibid.*, 61–2.

In the same manner, the agency of domination in *Frankenstein* resides with Walton, the maritime explorer who, by the end of the book, would give up on his enterprise of conquering the North Pole. He is so affected by the confession of Victor Frankenstein, that in the end, he loses his “hopes of utility and glory”⁷ and succumbs to the pleading of his sailors who want to return to England. Walton’s own confession to his sister is therefore more important than the other two confessions, Victor’s and the monster’s. In the words of Franco Moretti, “the broadest, most comprehensive, most universal narrative viewpoint is reserved for Walton,”⁸ the view which castigates male domination and ambition outside the family circle and the well-known spatial boundaries and makes Walton choose reunification with his sister rather than his maritime exploits. In line with earlier confessional narratives, in order for the confession to be justified, the main protagonist must commit a sin. Indeed, Victor sinned in his passionate love for science and the willingness and courage to break the boundaries of scientific knowledge and to create life out of death. Using the principles of galvanism, he found the secret of life. Yet, at the very beginning, he warned the reader: “I will not tell you the secret, my reader! Learn from me how dangerous is the acquirement of knowledge, and how much happier that man is who believes his native town to be the world, than he who aspires to become greater than his nature will allow.”⁹

His Promethean daring thus becomes the main cause of Victor’s decline. Many critics have emphasized the fact that Victor and Walton share the madness of Promethean over-reachers, but I want to suggest that it is possible to view the monster in the same light – a “Modern Prometheus” as the subtitle to the novel would suggest. His powerful confession, reported *verbatim* through the mouth of Victor, is the site where power relations become evident. The monster is entirely in Victor’s power, and his speech can acquire meaning only through Victor’s report. When the monster utters his first words, Victor wants to kill him and the monster deploras: “Remember that I am thy creature! I ought to be thy Adam, but I am rather the fallen angel, whom thou drivest from joy for no misdeed. Everywhere I see bliss, from which I alone am irrevocably excluded. I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend. Make me happy, and I shall again be virtuous.”¹⁰

7 Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus*, ed. Johanna Smith (Boston: Bedford Books, 1992), 179.

8 Franco Moretti, “Dialectic of Fear” in *Signs Taken for Wonders* (London and New York: Verso Books, 1997), 89.

9 Shelley, *Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus*, 53.

10 *Ibid.*, 89.

Nothing prepares us for the monster’s humanity as he seeks compassion and sympathy. One would expect the monster to have moral deficiencies just like the serpent in religious iconography, Leviathan or Minotaur, but Frankenstein’s monster is not a moral monster at all. By being treated ill, he would become wicked and kill little William, the family’s servant Justine and Victor’s best friend, Henry Clerval. Yet, he would openly confess to all his sins – the confession becomes a powerful tool to exculpate his guilt. The monster dared to run away from his creator-father, to enter the society of people (when he was helping out De Lacey family hidden in a pig-sty), to learn how to read and speak (by way of De Lacey family teaching their kids to speak), to acquire some knowledge of human history and religion (through reading Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Volney’s *Ruins*, Plutarch’s *Lives* and Goethe’s *Sorrows of Young Werther*) and the ideas of love and sympathy. Each and every time he was denied access to humanity. This is where, as many critics have shown, the Gothic genre is used to express different cultural anxieties and different kinds of disorder to which the community feels vulnerable¹¹ – the monster’s monstrosity does not reside in his repulsive appearance but in his desire to be assimilated to the society and treated like a human being. Indeed, through confessional narratives, Frankenstein becomes a novel of self-knowledge or a novel about the workings of the human mind. Jane Goodall, for instance, claims that Mary Shelley openly praised “Rousseau’s *Confessions*, Montaigne’s *Essays* and Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy* as works concerned with the science of self-knowledge” and suggests therefore that it is the science of self-knowledge rather than the science taking place in a laboratory that goes wrong in the story.¹² Therefore, by a clever stratagem, Mary Shelley chose to end her narrative with Walton returning to England and his choosing “the right path,” the one proposed by his reasonable self. Even though the Enlightenment ideal of reason has been called into question by a scientific experiment gone wrong, Walton’s reasonable decision to give up on his passionate endeavour and return to his family is the very affirmation of this ideal: the monsters should be excluded from the rights of citizenship, and the bourgeois should thrive within their domestic sphere.¹³

This idea brings us closer to the narrative of *My Escape* documentaries. We follow the journey of a dozen people who talk about why they left their

11 See for instance, Lee E. Heller’s “The Cultural Uses of Gothic” in *Frankenstein*, ed. Johanna M. Smith (Boston: Bedford Books, 1992), 326–341.

12 See Jane Goodall, “Frankenstein and the Reprobate’s Conscience” in *Studies in the Novel*, Vol. 31, No.1 (1999): 19–43.

13 Moretti, “Dialectic of Fear,” 83–109.

countries and how they managed to escape. One could say that they are all modern Promethean figures, mainly defying dictatorial regimes in their countries, inability to work, to move freely and to have a decent, purposeful life. In other words, they have been denied their “natural rights,”¹⁴ the buzz word for the age of Romanticism (when the word “rights” appeared almost profligately in the titles of books, *Rights of Man*, *Vindication of the Rights of Man & Woman* etc.) when the novelists and poets were at the centre of the assertion of rights. Wedi Keshi, a young man who was fleeing from Asmara in Eritrea, said that he wanted to escape to a place “where people would respect my rights” (*My Escape* 1). They wanted to be assimilated to the European society instead, as a more just, open-minded and democratic society. Their different journeys bear some resemblance to the gothic genre: an 8-year-old boy and his uncle travelled from Kabul in Afghanistan through Pakistan and Iran to reach Turkey. The boy left his sick mother behind, and the father remained looking after her. On their way, they had to go on foot through a desert and then, they drove in closed trucks with no ventilation. The news reports said that many such trucks used to traffic people would arrive to European countries with dead people inside. The same 8-year-old boy reported how he and his uncle were locked in a small room for four nights, fed with little bread, they could not use the toilet until they started screaming and in the end he got sick. (*My Escape* 1; 32:50)

The refugees reported fear (fear of the boats carrying too many people to the Greek islands capsizing; fear of death – as when drugged drivers drove them over the desert and people kept falling off the truck and were left to die in a desert); despair (feeling alone and abandoned, with no property, no family, no friends); helplessness (as when they were crossing the desert on foot and their skin would peel off); disorientation (not being sure where the boats and the trucks would take them and if they were moving in the right direction); being treated like things rather than humans (they were commodities in the chain of commercial exchange, many of them would fall into the hands of the mafia who would profit on trafficking people), having conflicting feelings about the future (being aware that Germany is 5,000 km away from Afghanistan for instance and knowing that some countries have closed their borders) and still expressing sympathy and compassion for their fellow beings (walking with children in one’s hands for days, giving your neighbour the last drop of water and burying the dead in the desert knowing that you might be the next one to die).

14 See R.S. White, *Natural Rights and the Birth of Romanticism in the 1790s* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

I would suggest that these immigrants felt like monsters as they had passed through the same predicament as the Frankenstein monster had. The monster expresses sympathy and compassion for human beings and rescues a little girl from drowning. As he is shot at by her father, he learns about intolerance, prejudice and hatred from every single human being, including his father. When he begs his father Victor to accept him, Victor responds: “There can be no community between you and me; we are enemies.”¹⁵ Therefore, the monster feels alone and abandoned, with no property, no family, no friends:

A man without possessions is a vagabond and a slave, doomed to waste his powers for the profits of the chosen few! (...) ¹⁶

And what was I? I knew that I possessed no money, no friends, no kind of property. Sorrow only increased with knowledge. ¹⁷

I sank on the damp grass in the sick impotence of despair. ¹⁸

For the monster, the feeling of despair is accompanied by the feeling of helplessness. He feels disoriented in the hellish world where he has nothing to hope for in the future:

Who was I? What was I? Whence did I come? What was my destination? (...) Like Adam, I was apparently united by no link to any other being in existence; but his state was far different from mine in every other respect. He had come forth from the hands of God a perfect creature, happy and prosperous (...) but I was wretched, helpless, and alone. Many times I considered Satan as the fitter emblem of my condition; for often, like him, when I viewed the bliss of my protectors, the bitter gall of envy rose within me. ¹⁹

Many Marxist critics have tried to contextualize this assertion, and they have stressed the “class location” of Mary Shelley, as a middle-class observer of current social and political upheavals. As the time of action was 1790s, right in the middle of the French Revolution, the monster obviously identified itself with the working-class and its exclusion from society could be read as Mary’s own “fear of the masses” – the same fear that her husband, P. B. Shelley, couched in terms of a “peaceful revolution” in his “Mask of Anarchy” written on the occasion of Peterloo Massacre in 1819 and published posthumously. The famous line “Ye are many, they are few,” advocates passive resistance of the masses and advises them

15 Shelley, *Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus*, 90–1.

16 Ibid., 106.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid., 118.

19 Ibid., 113.

to “look upon them as they slay/ till their rage has died away.”²⁰ Yet, the monster does not passively resist, he seeks revenge and becomes a serial killer. It becomes Mary Shelley’s warning not to cross the boundaries – the confessional mode is therefore employed as a powerful weapon of authenticity (where the reader must sympathize) and the Gothic genre as a means of castigating all the crossings of boundaries.²¹ More importantly however, it raises the issue of the fear of the other. In an influential reading of *Frankenstein* by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, she claims that the monster is and remains the other, forever cast away by civilized institutions and thus, even his crimes do not belong to the jurisdiction of law courts.²²

Thus, the refugees going through monstrous circumstances and their being detained in monstrous conditions instead of evoking sympathy and compassion in us, the powerful audience in front of whose eyes their life-narratives unfold, may elicit xenophobia and Islamophobia – the fear of the other. In that sense, their confessions are more terrifying than the monster’s story which is set in the past because they are recent history and many similar events are still ongoing now. The primary example of such fear of the other is Hungary’s right-wing Prime Minister Victor Orban whose migration policy endorsed Donald Trump’s US foreign policy when he decided to erect a razor fence along the borders of his country not to let the refugees in. In July 2016, a *Guardian* journalist reported what the Hungarian prime minister had said: “every single migrant poses a public security and terror risk. (...) For us migration is not a solution but a problem (...) not medicine but a *poison*, we don’t need it and won’t swallow it.”²³ In September 2016, Hungary had a poll on migration which not only divided the country on Orban’s foreign policy but, more importantly, spread hate at home. In the *Journal of European Ethnology*, “hate crimes” is a name given to those crimes which are motivated by various forms of prejudice and intolerance and it has come to use only recently (anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, xenophobia, homophobia, racism, etc.). Prejudice against the immigrants, their appearance (the

wearing of hijab) and religion, forms a prominent part of “hate”-related crimes in Europe. In 2012, the Danish minister of Integration and Social Affairs, Karen Haekkerup, opened a 12-hour workshop for anti-hate crime work with the following words: “A hate crime is more than just – in quotation mark – ‘ordinary,’ stupid and short-sighted violence. A hate crime targets the heart of democracy because hate crimes are a frontal attack on that which we treasure the most in a democratic state: that we can be who we are and say what we believe in as Europeans.”²⁴

The idea of hatred also figures prominently in *Frankenstein*. Victor hates the monster because he is the consequence of his experiment gone wrong. Mary Shelley hates the monster and talks about her “hideous progeny” in the 2nd Preface (October 15, 1831) to *Frankenstein*. The monster hates Victor too and the entire human race as he feels excluded from the possibility of having a normal life. Hatred is the strongest emotion which accompanies the fear of the other. Yet, more importantly, the novel problematizes the fact that it is impossible to get rid of the other – even when we want to place our abnormalities and deviations (monsters or people who are different from us) at a definite distance from us, they stick with us and remain an important part of us.

In her book *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva argues that products of “abjection” are created by our superego to embody contradictions. Therefore, we “abject” or “throw off” everything that is in-between and ambiguous in our beings, the fundamental inconsistencies that prevent us from declaring a coherent and independent identity to ourselves and others. While Freud’s idea of the “uncanny” has a more personal resonance, something that was explored in Mladen Dolar’s influential reading of *Frankenstein*,²⁵ Kristeva’s concept of “abject” has a powerful social resonance: all that we abject is cast into a figure of a criminal, monster, the other, condemned by the people in authority and subjected to the patterns of social normalcy they enforce. In that sense Victor, as an intelligent, experimental scientist is the authority and the monster is subjected to his gaze. In other words, the monster is in that sense a part of Victor that he does not want to acknowledge.²⁶ Here is how Kristeva describes abjection:

20 P. B. Shelley, “The Mask of Anarchy” in *Romanticism. An Anthology* (Third Edition), ed. Jason Wu (Hoboken, New Jersey: Blackwell Publishing; 2006), 1167–8.

21 See Jerrold E. Hogle (ed.), “Introduction” to *Cambridge Companion to the Gothic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

22 See Spivak Gayatri Chakravorty, “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism,” *Critical Inquiry*, Volume 12, No.1, (1985): 243–61.

23 “Hungarian Minister says migrants are ‘poison’ and ‘not needed,’” *The Guardian* (27 July 2016), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/26/hungarian-prime-minister-viktor-orban-praises-donald-trump> (*italics mine*).

24 B. S. Johansen, “Hate as a Political Outcast,” *Journal of European Ethnology (Ethnologia Europea)*, Volume 45, No.2 (2015), 73.

25 See Mladen Dolar, “‘I Shall Be with You on Your Wedding-Night’: Lacan and the Uncanny in Rendering the Real,” *October*, Vol. 58 (1991): 5–23.

26 See also Danny Boyle’s excellent theatrical adaptation with Jonny Lee Miller and Benedict Cumberbatch alternating roles as they are playing Victor and the monster at National Theatre Live.

A massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness, which familiar as it might have been in an opaque and forgotten life, now harries me as radically separate, loathsome. Not me. Not that. But not nothing either. A 'something' that I do not recognize as a thing. A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me. On the edge of non-existence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me. There, abject and abjection are my safeguards. The primers of my culture.²⁷

For Victor, the monster is an inevitable "something" that he gave a life to and cannot get rid of. The monster is that "weight of meaninglessness about which there is nothing insignificant" precisely because he is first and foremost human. The monster becomes the "radically separate and loathsome" and yet, a part of his creator. Victor thus becomes "a deject" – the one by whom the abject exists. What is typical of the deject, Kristeva explains, is that he never sounds himself concerning his "being," but rather concerning his place. Instead of asking "who am I?" he is continuously on the move and asking himself "where am I?". It is worthwhile remembering that Victor is constantly on the move, travelling several times from Geneva to Ingolstadt, to England and to the northern Scottish islands and in the end, he ends up in the North Pole. Though the romantic scenery of the Swiss landscapes, including the Alps, sometimes calms him down and makes him regain his strength, the monster follows him everywhere and Victor is continually restless. The abject would not let go. Furthermore, monstrous crimes that the monster commits, the killing of William, a 5-year-old Victor's brother and Elizabeth, the pure, innocent Victor's bride-to-be are moments when death interferes with what, in Victor's living universe, is supposed to save him from death: childhood, marriage and even science.²⁸ The abject is "the land of oblivion that is constantly remembered,"²⁹ and its time is double: the time of oblivion and the time when revelation bursts forth. It is interesting that Kristeva calls the time of oblivion, the time of thunder. As the flash of lightning always accompanies the appearance of the monster (as in the scene when the storm is enlightening Jura with faint flashes after William is killed), it is another proof that the monster is Victor's abject.

Yet, the abject is related to the cultural and social as much as the personal. For Kristeva, abjection elicits more archaic resonances that are culturally prior to sin and the abject confronts us with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of animal – in the realms of sex and murder. In Kristeva's words,

27 Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 2.

28 Ibid., 4.

29 Ibid., 8.

the abject is: "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite."³⁰ It is not difficult to see the connection between the monster and the aforementioned refugees. I would therefore suggest that a part of Europe and the world today see the immigrations crisis in the light of Kristeva's notion of abjection: these human beings are seen as "things," not respecting the system and order, the clear-cut boundaries between the East and the West. Their major sin is to keep surging forth within our own boundaries and in the process we, the Europeans, recognize our own abject – the other that eagerly wants to be assimilated to our own identity and is yet continuously trodden down upon. For many refugees, coming to Germany meant the acknowledgment of fellow human beings, recognizing the other as the mirror image of the self. In a symbolic ritual of acceptance, it meant changing clothes "to look like Germans" or "walking on the pavement just like Germans do." For some refugees, Germany meant a new life but many lost their lives on the way.

When in the end the monster begs Victor to be kind to him and accept him and Victor responds that he will never be accepted, the reader sympathizes with the monster. In other words, the monstrosity consists in fear, helplessness, despair, disorientation, being left alone and with nothing to hope for – this is what the immigrants share with Frankenstein's monster and what they try to express through their own confessional narratives. Yet, in the process, the mirror images become readily reversed: is Victor not more monstrous than his creature and are we not more monstrous in not showing sympathy and compassion when these are most needed. The stories told by the immigrants should not only elicit compassion, but they should prompt action. The story of Frankenstein persists in our culture because Frankenstein is the most powerful metaphor for our contemporary society: its main message is not that "every solitary creature is ugly,"³¹ but that the monstrosity of the creature still persists in everyone of us.

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Ana Popović

Amal Kassir: Words versus Weapons

Abstract: Amal Kassir is a Syrian American slam poet who fights against Islamophobia in the United States. The chapter examines portrayals of a culture lost to war, and the life of second-generation immigrants denied the right to having a home. She uses her powerful performances to fight oppression by presenting it as a universal issue independent of the cultural context.

Keywords: Islamophobia, slam poetry, Syrian civil war, 9/11, second-generation immigrants

1 Introduction

Amal Kassir's slam poetry addresses the most pressing issues concerning the Muslim immigrant population in the United States. Even though there is little mention of her poetry in the literature concerning Arab American poets, she has in recent years managed to establish herself as a critic of the approach of the American society towards the Muslim community. Thematically, Kassir's poetry belongs to the *Mahjar* group. In Arabic, *Mahjar* stands for a "place of immigration," but in recent decades it has become the collective name for the works of literature of Arab diasporic writers in America. While it could be narrowly defined as restrictive to a group of works concerning Arab American writings in the early twentieth century, a more inclusive definition constitutes *Mahjar* literature as works with common thematic threads concerning the ever-present issues in the lives of the Arab diaspora.¹

The difficulty of defining Arab American or *Mahjar* literature arises from the fact that even the term "Arab American" describes a group whose identity is not clearly defined. The phrase refers to multiple identities, rather than a unified one, as it includes a variety of religions, cultures and countries of origin. The very idea of grouping such a diverse body of people under this uniform umbrella term is precariously reductive, as the term conceals "the complexity of identities, subjectivities, histories and politics they entail."² However, it also entails the

1 Ludescher, Tanyss, "From Nostalgia to Critique: An Overview of Arab American Literature," *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S.* 31, no. 4 (2006): 95–97, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30029684>.

2 Rebecca Layton, *Arab-American and Muslim Writers* (New York: Chelsea House, 2010), 7.