



'How Do We Belong?': The Perspective of 'Home' in Leila Buck's *ISite*

Asst. Prof. Marwa Ghazi Mohammed, PhD

Dept. of English - College of Education for Women

University of Baghdad - Iraq

Email: marwa_grery@coeduw.uobaghdad.edu.iq

ABSTRACT

Home refers to the place where someone is raised, a place of origin, a place of belonging. This concept is for everyone lives in his own home; however, it is not the same for those who have left their countries of origin and immigrated to another countries. They will be torn between two worlds and cultures in which the question of 'How do we belong?' is crucial for them and particularly for their second generation who are born and raised away from the home of their ancestors. It is a universal case which has become very prominent recently due to the increase in numbers of immigrants, particularly from the middle east to Europe and the U.S. An example of the immigrated groups is Arab Americans who immigrated to the U.S. in the late nineteenth century.

In her solo play, *ISite*, Leila Buck presents her personal experience as a Lebanese American searching for home to which she belongs. The play combines personal memories and experiences of her and her relatives in which the protagonist plays the role of different characters. The aim is to have an answer for the ambivalent feeling and attitude towards home of origin and the U.S. as a host country or a replaced home.

Keywords: Arab American, belonging, home, host country, uprooted.



Introduction

Arabs in the U.S. are being described as the “most invisible of the invisibles” (kadi, 1994, p.14). There are several reasons for this description; their skin colour enables them to be recognised as white Americans more than other immigrant ethnic groups. Many of Arab immigrants either lost their family name when they came to the U.S. or they willingly changed their names to be assimilated in the new western society. Moreover, the early waves of Arab immigrants who came between (1890-1914) were registered as Ottomans because their Arab countries were controlled by Ottoman empire. (Basiouny, 2009, p.2). However, the events of 9/1 transferred Arab Americans from being the invisible into “highly visible community that either directly or indirectly affects American's so-called culture wars” (Salaita, 2007, p.110). They started to be called Arab Americans after civil rights movements in the U.S. in the 1960s (Basiouny, 2009, p.4).

Arab American theatre is the latest of Arab American art movement to get prominence. However, this does not mean that Arab Americans have not produced drama earlier. Arab American dramas were produced since 1896. They were part of Arab literature directed to the Arabs, who immigrated to the U.S., the aim of these works was to preserve culture and heritage; some of these early plays were written in Arabic to associate Arabs in the U.S. with their roots of the homeland. Later, they presented farces which depicted the complexities and the problem of living as an immigrant. (Najjar, 2014, pp.1-2) Post 9/11 Arab American artists were urged to self-represent themselves against the negative stereotyping of Arab Americans. Works just like Nibras' *Sajjal* (2002) and Suhair Hammad's *ReOrientatism* (2003) depicted the experience of Arab Americans as an ethnic group. Later works dealt with more aspects of Arab American experience, such as their identity, assimilation, sense of belonging, and other political and social aspects (Basiouny, 2009, p.4). Basiouny states that “the theatre of an ethnic minority can be used to study both the minority culture and majority culture within which it seeks to define itself” (1). Arab American playwrights presented plays and performances which displayed their issues; particularly second-generation Arab Americans who are torn between their identity as Americans and their original roots. These works share the global message which is the complexities of hybrid identities and the ways of correcting negative misrepresentations depicted in the media. Thus, Arab American theatre is a form of expressing their voices as it sheds light on the experience of being an Arab American in the American society (Basiouny, 2009, p.5).



Isite (1999) is a play by Leila Buck in which the playwright reflects her personal experience of the meaning of home. Buck is a Lebanese American writer, performer, and intercultural educator. Her mother is a Lebanese and her father is an American diplomat. Because of her father work, she grew up living in different countries. About this, Buck said “through my life I have had the opportunity to witness how seemingly different lives, cultures and realities exist simultaneously” (Buck, 2011). Her advisor in the college encouraged her to write about this rich experience in which her first play, *ISite*, was born (Najjar, 2014, p.23). *ISite* tells the story of a Lebanese American diplomat family who has travelled and lived in many Arabic countries to be lastly settled in the U.S. the play is a solo performance in which the Arab American protagonist performs the role of various characters from her life just like her mother, grandmother and older and younger versions of herself. The depicted woman presents the conflict between leaving the old and adopting to live with the new. *ISite* portrays the development of a transitional identity through generation and displacement. The whole play is a journey in which the protagonist changes from one character to another according to the place and the time.

The traditional Arabic form of storytelling is used in narrating the events in *ISite* and is acted by a solo performance. The protagonist, WOMAN, plays the roles of different women in her family, telling stories of pain, banishment, war, and hope for the future. (Najjar, 2014, p.23). Buck chooses the solo performance because it is “a fusion of informal, direct communication with the audience, heightened storytelling, and character driven scenes. The WOMAN speaks directly to the audience, addressing them as though they were the person to whom each character is speaking, so that the audience is put in the role as the WOMAN herself, witness to her experiences” (Najjar, 2014, p.23).

The Perspective of 'Home' in *ISite*

Home has its own significance for Arab Americans, and for second Arab American generation it is a controversial concept. To have a full and comprehending definition of the word ‘home’ is not easy, particularly the meaning of ‘home’ extends the definition of ‘home’. Home is a word with multi-layered meanings which depend on the context or the perspective being dealt with. Blunt and Varley (2004) explain that the meanings of home are diverse: “as a space of belonging and alienation, intimacy and violence, desire and fear, the home is invested with meaning, emotions, experiences and relationships that lie at the heart of human life” (p.3).

The play begins with the scene of the plane is about to take off, as WOMAN enters pregnant trying to find her seat, she reveals that she has taken her “first international flight in the womb” (Buck, 1999, p.3.). Her childhood has



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been spent in different countries, at age two and a half she was in Kuwait. Later, she thought she was an Omani at age five when her parents decided to travel home as she asked “But where is home? Wherever we’re going” (Buck, 1999, p.4). Benjamin (1995) explains that home has concrete and abstract implication because it is a place where someone lives and has a feeling of comfort (p.2). The child, who is wondering about home, has the abstract meaning of home when she thought she was an Omani. Home as a word does not only refer to the house, neighbourhood or home town, it denotes homeland or nation, a country in which one lives or more particularly where one comes from. The latter concept of home is a vital for immigrants. They are torn between where they come from and where they reside in the present. The country of origin continues to have the notion of home on more than one generation even for those who have never been in there (Duncan and Lambert, 2004, p.388). The playwright presents the perspective of home from various point of views; Teta (the Lebanese grandmother) and Jeddo (the Lebanese grandfather)’s view of home as first generation immigrants, the American diplomat and his Lebanese wife, and Leila who stands for second immigrant generation who is raised away from the homeland.

Teta and Jiddo stand for first immigrant generation who have left their own country Lebanon to escape civil war. Home for immigrants means family’s attachment and sense of belonging which are recalled in memories and nostalgia. Migrants search in the host country for a new home. (Boccagni, 2017, p.24). Thus, the host country is supposed to replace “a material environment and a set of meaningful relationships, recollections, and aspirations” (Boccagni, 2017, p.24). In one of the scenes, the WOMAN in the role of Teta remembers, in her Lebanese American accent, the American’s judge’s words in the day they have got their official American citizenship. He tells her:

Preserve your heritage.
It is because of dis dod we are richer dan any oder country and
our mind
And heart are open to anything.
Just keep your culture, your language, your food, your beleifs,
and teach
dem to your children. (Buck, 1999, p.10)

As she remembers that day, Teta repeats “I am from the United States of America. Ana min al wulayaat al mutahida al amreekiyi” (Buck, 1999, p.11).

The notion of having more than one home is associated within immigrants who maintain the multiplicity of the ‘here’ and ‘there’. They are rooted to the families left behind in their home; also they are connected to their new life in the host country where they try to reshape and reconstitute the notion of home (Nish, 2018, p.2). *ISite* presents the idea of domesticating the host



country. The Lebanese grandfather planted a blue spruce tree the day his granddaughter was born. The tree grew up two stories tall as “proof that you can put down roots wherever you’re planted” (Buck, 1999, p. 25). Moreover, Teta planted basil and mint which she brought from Lebanon. WOMAN (in the role of their granddaughter) talks about how they took care and nurtured them in an attempt to have roots in new soil. These plants symbolize them in trying to live in a new land as their home.

The U.S. for the Lebanese family is like a nursing home. In one of the scenes the protagonist visits her grandmother in a nursing home in New Jersey and notices her grandmother’s memories are fading away: “They call that place a home, too. But it’s really nursing the loss of one” (Buck, 1999, p.14). A nursing home is a symbol of host country which is supposed to replace or take care of people who have lost their original home whose memories would fade away by the death of its citizen and the birth of new generation in a host country. Yi-Fu Tuan (2004) defines home as a “place that offers security, familiarity and nurture” (p.164). The U.S. is the nursing home whose residents are thankful for the care they feel at it.

The new generation is a stranger to the original home where they know and hear about it in form of stories and memories. The granddaughter is the new generation who is a stranger to both. She is a hybrid torn between two identities. *Isite* follows the growth of this plant in the U.S. When she was born, her parents realized the possibility of being treated as “other”. They discussed the choice of her name, arguing whether to give her a middle Eastern name and an American middle name or vice versa. However, her mother preferred the Arabic name, to be the middle one, calling her ‘Kathryn Leila’ (Buck, 1999, p.4) because she wants her to “feel like she belongs, as an American” (Buck, 1999, p.4) just like father. Belonging is one of the perspectives of home as Chaudhary and Rowles (2005) explain that home has emotional connection because it is associated with the aspects of being in the world, belonging to it (11). The mother’s choice came out of her bitter experience at school with the other kids who have a negative stereotyping image of her mother:

The kids at the school asked your mom if she lived in a tent? How she dressed! And she said, ‘No I don’t live in a tent, I have jewellery! And she brought them all home to see the six gold bracelets her uncle, Jeddo’s brother Khalid gave her when she was born. (Buck, 1999, p30)

The WOMAN in the role of the granddaughter remembers the children calling her ‘dirty’ and ‘camel’ when they knew that she is an Arab. She runs to her mother who talks to Leila in Arabic and the little girl insists that her mother speaks in English. Then, the scene shifts to Lebanon where the WOMAN is a young granddaughter who meets the relatives of her mother, they talk to her in



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Arabic. As she is unable to understand fully and to express herself in Arabic. The scene ends by hearing a recorded voice asking “where are you from/min wayn inta?” (Buck, 1999, p.7). Nish Bedford (2018) emphasizes the necessity to preserve cultural linguistic heritage in the making of home because it is all about planting soils of one’s identity (4). These soils are memories and nostalgia associated with materialities. Cultural habits, mother-tongue, traditional food are needed in the process of building here. Reclaiming and reprocessing of habits are required in making home (Ahmed, Castaneda & Fortie, 2003, p.9).

The other perspective of home is associated with the identity’s construction. Forming one’s identity is a social process which engages physical environment and personal engagement. It is home experience that affects identity. Thus, self-identity is deeply influenced by the interaction with other fellow human beings or the residential environment. The social and environmental interaction plays a role in the process of self adaptation and self-recreation. ‘I’ and ‘Me’ are the two aspects of the self which are preserved in the light of one’s interaction with the social and physical environment (Chaudhury & Rowles, 2005, pp.12-13). Social identity is formed by one’s identification with a certain group, whether with a national, ethnic, family or work-related social group (Mish & Lahiri-Ray, 2018, p.3). The sense of belonging and being part of society is a perspective of home which the play examines. In one of her journeys, the young granddaughter is with her mother in Saudi Arabia. She describes how they both wear the traditional “a3bayas and ghatas” (Buck, 1999, p.8); they are fully covered in their tour in the popular markets; she comments about being there “As long as I remain silent, I belong” (Buck, 1999, p.8). This scene parallels another scene as she is back to the U.S. walking across the Mason-Dixon line. She enjoys walking exchanging smiles and waves to passers-by who seem friendly as she wonders whether she would receive the same smiles if her skin’s colour is darker or she speaks with a particular accent that distinguishes her. In the two scenes Buck presents how it is easy sometimes to feel belonging when it is related to the geographical environment rather than the social environment. Moreover, part of the construction of one’s identity is the language he/she speaks. The playwright reflects the role of cross-cultural experience in shaping the identity by using Lebanese words written in English letters like, “shoo haboutiti, shoo sar?” (Buck, 1999, p.5), “Inti kteer Amerrianeeyi” (Buck, 1999, p.7). the technique of using the two languages in this way is to depict how the character, torn between two cultures, tries to construct her identity between two languages standing for two different cultures. (Elias, 2017, p.50)

The question of how people belong has been investigated from different aspects. The WOMAN (in the role of the young granddaughter) talks about her trip to Jeddah with her mother. Jeddah is a city in Saudi Arabia where they claim that Eve’s tomb is there. It is called Jeddah, which means grandmother, because



of Eve's being buried there and Eve is the grandmother of all human beings. They manage to reach the site which is supposed to be Eve's grave. She starts asking questions and conversation from one side to Eve as she shows photos of different women, (differ in nationality and race), they are Eve's granddaughters. All these various women from many places have one grandmother, Eve. Differences are not the cause of mistreatment and discrimination. They all belong to Adam and Eve. In this scene, *ISite* examines the unity and belonging of human being despite their variety. All of them come from the same family. Accordingly, the play presents home as 'non-exclusionary' zone (Nish, 2018, p.3). The whole play is journey which depicts the meaning of crossing borders in an attempt to define and redefine the concept of home. The journey ends by revealing the need for home which is expressed in the last scene by the protagonist continuous attempts of building and rebuilding castles of sand; "I made castles out of sand, hoping that they'd never be washed away (Buck, 1999, p. 44). The symbolic castle out of sand presents the fragile home and the scene of uprootedness. However, the play ends with suggesting the meaning of home as it is related to the self. It is the existence of man on land that defines home:

We all take our shape from the land that we touch.
That's what home is I guess- where you make contact
with the earth.
And every time I touch down in new soil-
I see myself- for the first time. (Buck, 1999, 43)

Buck expresses her aim which is to make the audience decide how a group or a nation chooses the stories, people, cultures that shape who they are. (Buck, 2007, p.30)

Conclusion

ISite presents the multi layered perspectives of home in three generation of Arab Americans in which each generation forms his perspective of home. The first immigrant Lebanese family works to make the host country as their home by transferring their traditions, food, culture there. The sense of uprootedness is replaced by planting new soils in a new land where they feel security which their original country lacks because of war. The second and third generation are torn between their home where they are born and their ancestors' home. Buck explores the universal perspective of home out of personal experience as an Arab American in the U.S. and the general notion that the whole world is supposed to be home since they have the same granddaughter, Eve and

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grandfather Adam. Moreover, the playwright criticizes the borders which are put by people to differentiate and discriminate them.

The symbolic journey in *ISite* addresses the question of who the residents and the guests are. What makes one a resident, a citizen and what makes him/her a guest. The playwright deals with the possibilities of belonging which are related to the social and cultural environment; she suggests that people are the ones who form their notion of home.



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